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Thesis

THE NEW ENGLAND BACKGROUNDS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF MARY E. WILKINS

Submitted by

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J.N.

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THE NEW ENGLAND BACKGROUNDS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF MARY E. WILKINS

CONTRAST BETWEEN NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

Rural New England of Today

The wide macadam road, State-owned, State-improved, runs between meadows and farmlands, up sunlit hills and down into shadowy valleys. Over its dustless length rumbles a heavy truck laden with farm produce on its way to market; a battered Ford rattles along towards the nearest railroad station, a sleek blue roadster roars by with open exhaust, its driver bent on making two hundred miles before nightfall. Far up against the clear blue of the sky the wings of an airplane glint in the sunlight and the drone of a motor drifts earthward. The road runs on by cultivated farms whose owners use the latest machinery and follow scientific methods, who belong to the Improvement Association and read bulletins sent out by the Department of Agriculture. Here are roadside stands where passing city folks stop their automobiles to buy fruits and vegetables; and here are cosy, freshly painted cabins where tourists may camp overnight. From open farmhouse windows drift the strains of a string ensemble broadcast on the radio from far away Boston, or the discordant notes of a jazz band or the droning voice of a New York lecturer on home decorations.

The farmhouses, each with its R. F. D. box waiting

for the passing mail man, are modernized with running water, electric lights, telephones and vacuum cleaners. Perhaps the housewife who is listening in to a concert as she does her housework will, in the evening, enjoy the latest "talkie" at some moving picture theatre to which she will ride in her husband's Ford. On runs the road past the town library, a small granite building on the hill, which together with the extension service of the state offers the country folk a wide variety of books; on it goes past the modern brick school house with its latest improvements and many classrooms each with a teacher -- a consolidated Junior High School serving several districts from which the pupils ride in motor busses. On runs the road. Over it have come parcel post packages to farmers' wives bringing the latest styles from mail order departments of city stores; over it have driven farmers' sons and daughters on their way to college; over it have come lecturers for Home Demonstration Projects or members of Chatauquas to give entertainments; over it constantly passes a stream of humanity from the great world, into the great world. That is rural New England today.

Causes of Inevitable Change

How different it is from the New England countryside of half a century ago! Yet the change was inevitable. Inventions have revolutionized not only the industrial world and methods of farming but have also changed the very homes of country people. Newspapers, magazines, libraries have carried knowledge everywhere. State departments have issued

for the passing mail car, are modernized with running water, electric lights, bolsterless and vestibule Pullmans. Leaving the homestead who is leaving it to a country as gone over to mechanical will, in the evening, enjoy the lateest "talkies" at some moving picture theatre in Gilmer who will view in her lounge a film. On turns the road past the town library, a small stucco building on the hill, which together with the extension service of the state offers the country folk a wide variety of books; on it goes past the modern brick school house with its latest improvements and classrooms each with a teacher -- a consolidated Junior High School serving several districts from which the youngs ride in motor buses. On turns the road. Over it has come journal jobs postage to transport wire carrying the latest stories from all over departments of city stores; over it have driven farmers' cars and truckers on their way to colleges; over it came tenantry for more Democratic friends or a wedding of kinsfolk to give entertainment; over it equestrian teams a stream of humanity from the great world, into the great world. That is rural New England today.

Causes of Local's Change

How different it is from the New England country side of half a century ago. Yet the trends are inevitable. Inventions have revolutionized not only the industrial world and methods of trading but have also changed the very lives of country people. Newspapers, magazines, libraries have carried knowledge everywhere. State departments have issued

bulletins on all kinds of subjects; correspondence schools and university extension boards have offered a wide variety of courses to ambitious country boys and girls. Through the radio stock market reports, symphony concerts, church services and the latest daily news enters the homes of farmers, bringing closer contact with the outside world and wider interests.

Rural New England of Late Nineteenth Century

The isolated New England village of the late nineteenth century exists no more, with its narrow outlook and its hidebound conventions. The well with its old oaken bucket, the iron pump by the sink, the candle and kerosene lamp, and the marble-topped table are becoming a thing of the past. One seldom sees a little red school house of one room with its air-tight stove, its benches and carved initials, its one teacher for all grades. The husking bees and quilting parties have given place to bridge and golf and movies. Instead of the old-fashioned kinds of dress--the shawl and "bunnet", the sprigged muslin and black alpaca, the women folk have the latest styles in clothes, purchased in an enterprising town store or ordered from the great city through a mail order department. The young swain no longer takes his sweetheart for a slow, leisurely ride along dusty country roads, and the farmer in his calico-covered rocker in the kitchen, no longer nods over the almanac or religious paper---he listens in to a football game or prize fight. Even the old character types are vanishing--the meek, over-godly young minister in shabby clothes,

Multiplies in all kinds of everyday conveniences (electric and energy-saving devices have efforts made mainly to compress to sedition country-boys and girls. Through the radio stories, their reports, symphony concerts, church services and the latest daily news enters the homes of farmers, bringing closer contact with the outside world and wider interests.

Rural Life Not Isolated Are isolated New England villages of the late nineteenth century giving be more, with the nation coming and its ridiculous novels lost. The mail with its old ocean water, the iron pump by the sink, the candle and kerosene lamp, and the heavy-hoped table are becoming a thing of the past. The house sees a lively red school house as the room with its fir-tipped eave, the barnes and carved in-light, its one leaves for all grades. The hunting boys and fishing parties have given place to trimmed the old hat and Indian of the old-fashioned kinds of times--the shawl and "bonnet", the spring-of wagon and blue aprons, the women folk have the lesser angles in dresses, impressed in an enterprising store or market from the great city into an a mail order catalogue. The young swain no longer wins his sweetheart for a ride, leisurely ride along dusty country roads, and the lazy or in his "skies-covered rocker in the kitchen, no longer hole over the shoulder of his lady-love--he lies one in to a trolley car or price light. Even the old-fashioned type too wooing--the beau, over-gay young dialect in shady stroll,

the jilted sweetheart pining away in loneliness but ever loyal, the eccentric, repressed spinster with no "job" or career to add interest to her narrow life.

NEW ENGLAND VILLAGES OF LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY STILL LIVING IN SHORT STORIES OF MARY E. WILKINS

But the New England village of nearly half a century ago, although it has disappeared from the countryside of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, has not vanished entirely; it may be glimpsed by us to-day, for it still lives in the short stories of Mary E. Wilkins. There we may see the fields and roadsides abloom in butterfly time or buried beneath winter snows. Again the bell tolling from the little white-steepled church summons the villagers to worship, and again the loafers gather on a cold day around the air-tight stove in the general store. Rosemary, lavender, and thyme bloom in the neat gardens of the white frame cottages, and the ground of the old cemetery with its mossy, leaning stones is beautiful with the blue and white of violets and houstonias. Once more the spinster has her lonely supper of applesauce, biscuits and tea; the women folk gather for prayer meeting at a neighbor's house; the young swain comes courting in his old-fashioned buggy.

The jilted girl, the domineering mother, the gentle old sisters, the narrow-minded spinster, the stubborn bachelor -- all those unique personalities live again with their human joys and sorrows and yearnings.

LIFE OF MARY E. WILKINS AS A PREPARATION FOR HER WORK

A review of the life of Mary E. Wilkins will reveal the fact that she wrote not from mere hearsay but from observation and actual contact with the conditions she described; she was well-fitted for the task of depicting rural New England in the late nineteenth century, for her whole life was a preparation for her work. Coming from Puritan stock, with an ancestry dating back to old Salem of witchcraft days and repressed for generations, Mary E. Wilkins was born in Randolph, Mass. in 1863. Her father, of humble station, was a builder in Randolph and later a storekeeper in Brattleboro, Vermont.

Here in a remote New England village, the author-to-be spent her childhood and girlhood, receiving a rather austere and limited schooling and living in an atmosphere of inherited Puritanism with its conventions, superstitions, and narrowness. In a social group inbred, restricted to neigh-

borhood limits and suspicious of things outside, Mary became acquainted with the unique personalities, nineteenth century customs, and New England background which she later depicted in her stories.

A year was spent at Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1874. Then, upon her father's death, Miss Wilkins returned to Randolph where she lived until her marriage in 1902 to Charles Freeman of Metuchen, New Jersey.

It is an interesting fact that in her early years Mary did not want to write but to paint; however, having neither materials nor ability for an artist's career, she turned to writing. While still a girl she tried her hand at religious poems, children's verses for a little Fall River magazine, and stories and verses for the periodical, "Wide Awake". Her first work of any importance and real significance was the short story "Two Old Lovers", accepted on the merest chance by the editor of "Harper's Bazaar". From that time on few manuscripts were returned. "A Humble Romance" and "A New England Nun" followed in 1887 and 1891 bringing fame and popularity to the author who had started on her career of depicting, with singular force and simplicity, episodes from the remote, isolated lives of country folk who, in spite of their reserve and eccentricities, were intensely human.

LITERARY TENDENCIES OF THE PERIOD

It is true that the girlhood environment of Mary E. Wilkins determined to a great extent the type of story she was to write, but there was another powerful influence on her work -- the literary tendencies of the time. Had those tendencies been other than they were, we might never have had Miss Wilkins' stories, picturing for us the New England villages of the 90's and revealing the soul of a passing regime.

The period immediately following the Civil War was one of transition, of swan songs, of a new awakening. With the settlement of the West and the increase in steamships, telegraph, and railroads, came the realization of America as a great neighborhood. A new spirit swept the field of literature, a spirit of revolt and democracy and realism. Readers were no longer interested in dreaming, moonlight, and mystery; they wanted to hear about real people, particularly unusual types of character; they wanted to learn more about their own land. "America shaken from narrow sectionalism and contemplation of Europe, woke up and discovered America.....In a kind of daze she wandered from section to section of her own land, discovering everywhere peoples and manners and languages that were as strange to her as foreign lands".[1]

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[1] History of American Literature: Fred Lewis Pattee, page 15

The life of the gold coast and Sierra Nevadas was pictured in Brete Harte's "Luck of Roaring Camp" and the primitive settlements of Indiana in Eggleston's "Hoosier Schoolmaster". Miss French wrote about the dwellers in the canebrakes of Arkansas and Cable about the Creoles of the Lousiana bayous. It was a period of prose and the short story, of bold characterization, dialect, realism and local color.

OTHER WRITERS OF THE PERIOD WHO PICTURED NEW ENGLAND VILLAGES OF THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Sarah Orne Jewett

There are other women writers who also pictured the New England villages of the late nineteenth century--Sarah Orne Jewett, Alice Brown, and Rose Terry Cook--giving us the same background as Mary Wilkins and yet how different! Of them all, Miss Jewett was the first to paint the passing of the old regime in New England. Instead of eccentric, grotesque characters she gives us quiet and kindly men and serene and sweet-tempered women, the inner nobility of their souls shining through their simple personalities. Almost too literary in tendency rather than narrowly realistic, she avoids everything common, sordid, and coarse and presents the finer, gentler elements of life. There is a touch of romance and

glamor to her stories, "a softness of atmosphere, an evanescent shade of regret for something vanished forever".[1] "She paints the present against the background of an old, forgotten, far-off past with a dim light upon it".[2]

Alice Brown — Alice Brown pictures scenes true to the life they represent, but, in contrast to the author of "A Humble Romance" and "A New England Nun", adds a richness of background to her realism and treats nature with a poetic touch. Her style has a sprightliness and freedom about it; her pictures are beautified by grace and romance; and her stories are enriched with humor and pathos.

Rose Terry Cook — Rose Terry Cook describes the odd and whimsical with a delicacy of touch and treats her subjects with sympathy and tenderness.

STYLE OF MARY E. WILKINS

Influence of Literary Tendencies of the Time on the Short Stories of Mary E. Wilkins — Writing for the magazines of her day and wishing to give the public what it demanded, Mary E. Wilkins in response to the literary tendencies of the time chose the short story as a vehicle of expression. Brief episodes in simple lives are pictured by means of a realistic and unadorned style; rural New

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1 History of American Literature: Fred L. Pattee, Chapter XI, page 233

2 Ibid

England dialect is used abundantly, unique characters are graphically presented, and remote villages are sketched with illuminating touches of local color.

Puritanic and Unadorned

Although Mary E. Wilkins writes of rural New England land in the same period as the above authors, the general impression given by her stories is not the same, the result probably of her methods of writing. There is no gentle glamor nor atmosphere of romance about her tales, no poetic, beautifying touch. The style is, on the other hand, impersonal, unornamented, severe and puritanic. The wording is meagre and the sentence structure bare. Even her titles are parsimonious --- "Louisa", "A Solitary", "Gentian", and "Butterfly Time"; few of them have more than three or four words.

Effects Accomplished In Few Strokes

In a few strokes she often accomplishes her effects. For years Clarissa May has treasured the letters of her one-time lover, Gilman Lane, and has carried his image in her heart. Returning unexpectedly, he comes to call but remains in the parlor with Anne, the young and pretty sister. As Clarissa sits alone in her room listening to the murmur of voices, all the heartache, all the agony of her broken dream is revealed in a few words: "She sat on the edge of her little bed, listening. She was rigid; her hands were as cold as ice".[1] For twenty years Old Lady Pingree had been saving penny by penny until she had enough money for an independent

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1 The Scent of the Roses in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins page 206

burial. In that thought she took a pathetic pride. Then Jenny's mother died and Jenny, heartbroken over the thought of a "town burial", sobbed out the story to her neighbor. Old Lady Pingree stood motionless. "There is no knowing what a clash of spiritual armies with trumpets and banners there was in her brave old heart; but not a line of her face moved; she hardly breathed. 'Wait a minute, Jenny'".[1] And so is revealed the supreme struggle in the soul of a lonely old woman and her decision to sacrifice the dearest dream of her bare, hard life.

Crisis in Repressed Life

In this story, as in most of her work, Miss Wilkins does not trace the slow development of a soul through a long period of time, but pictures the leading character at some crisis of a repressed life. In "An Object of Love" Ann Millet, meek, reverential, God-fearing, suddenly becomes a wicked, rebellious old woman, stubbornly refusing to go to church, all because of the disappearance of Willy, her cat, the one and only object of her intense, repressed affections. We see Luella Norcross, the village agnostic, resolutely making up her mind to believe in Jesus Christ because she can't "see any other way out of it for John Gleason",[2] the hired man she had once befriended and who had just been arrested for murder. We are allowed to glimpse the poor old sisters, Harriet and Charlotte, running away from the "Old Ladies" Home"

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1 Old Lady Pingree in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 156

2 Life-Everlastin' in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 362

to which the mistaken charity of their friends had sent them and, jubilant as two children, returning to the pathetic little house where they had always lived.

Characters Eccentric and Picturesque

In response to the demand of her time, the characters graphically presented by Mary Wilkins are usually picturesque and eccentric. We find such personalities as Hetty Fifield, Nathan Gunn, and Marcus Woodman. Marcus, stubbornly true to a vow that he will never again enter church while Mr. Morton is minister, sits on the church steps during service time, Sunday after Sunday, in all kinds of weather. Because his wife runs away with another man, old Nathan has shunned society for years, living alone, half-starving himself, and sleeping on the bare floor. As for Hetty, who could be more eccentric than this defiant old woman who moves into the meeting house when her home is seized for taxes and, curtaining off a corner of the back gallery with a sunflower quilt, sets up her bed and cooking stove? But no matter how strange some of the personalities in Miss Wilkins' stories are, the emphasis is put on character; it is always the moving force, bringing about the crisis and effecting the outcome, whatever it is.

Narrow Social System Pictured

The short stories gathered together in "Silence", "A New England Nun" and "A Humble Romance" do not picture a transfigured New England with its finest

elements revealed in the gentle glamor of a romantic past; they give instead a vivid and at times remorseless picture of life in remote villages with their grim social system and narrow outlook. So strong was the sense of local conservatism that strangers, such as Olive Briggs who came from out of town and worked in the milliner's shop, were looked upon with suspicion. Public opinion was always strong and was frankly expressed against those who wandered from the beaten track of local custom and tradition.

When Lawrence Thayer jilted his sweetheart on their wedding day, village tongues wagged busily and the young man was jeered by his mates and ostracized by Delia's friends. No broad charity was shown to the wealthy old man who was too miserly to call in a doctor; and Nicholas Gunn, the solitary, furtively buying Indian meal and matches met with the coarse ridicule of loafers in a country store. Sometimes "Considerable scandal of a modest kind spread about the village. There was a rumor that Lucinda Moss had not taken up her sitting-room carpet for ten years, nor her parlor carpet within the memory of man, and that she deliberately shut up one or two chambers and let them stay so, with no application of broom or duster, year after year".[1]

Realism In general the style is realistic. We catch a glimpse of a little white-painted mantelshelf and on it a

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1 An Innocent Gamester in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 368

smart china mug with "Friendship's Offering" in gold letters or we see wall paper with gilded scrolls that no longer shine and old engravings covered by a half-transparent film. Perhaps we scent the sweet, rich smell of baking cake floating into a parlor or catch the mysterious sweetness of wild grapes in the night air. The picture may not be a pleasant one as that of Lavinia's mother, over ninety and bedridden. "The skin on the pinched face was of a dark yellow color, the eyes were like black points, the sunken mouth had a sardonic pucker".[1] Moreover, much of the realism is due to the dialect, which is an inseparable part of the stories and gives them a strong dash of local color.

Dialect Often the plot is, to a great extent, developed through the conversation of the characters, conversation filled with phrases native to rural New England; and many stories begin or end with a telling bit of dialogue.

Humor and Pathos Although unflinchingly realistic in places, the stories of Miss Wilkins are brightened or softened here and there by touches of humor or pathos, there being much more of the latter than of the former. We cannot help smiling at Ann Millet defiantly throwing away her squashes because Willy, the cat, has disappeared, but our hearts are stirred by her cry: "I ain't never hed anything like other women. I ain't hed no folks of my own since I kin remember. I've worked hard all my life an' hed nothin' at all to

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1 An Independent Thinker in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins pate 298

love....an' I've got hands an' I want somethin' I kin touch".[1] There is pathos, too, in the attempts of the two elderly sisters to hide from the prying eyes of a neighbor the secret of their one and only gala dress or in the unquenchable faith of Fidelia plodding day after day, year after year to the postoffice for a letter that never came.

THE NEW ENGLAND COUNTRYSIDE

The New England countryside! According to Fred L. Pattee in his Development of the American Short Story, there is no Mary E. Wilkins country, only people; the author cares little for external nature and the backgrounds are meager. Perhaps Miss Wilkins' stories lack the richness of background characteristic of Sarah Orne Jewett's work; perhaps her nature scenes do not have the poetic touch of Alice Brown's. Be it as it may, in fragmentary bits of description here and there, she gives us fleeting glimpses of the fields and meadows, the gardens and roadsides, the white farmhouses and lowly cottages of a vanishing era. She gives them to us softened by sunset glow or silvered by moonlight; she pictures them in rain or shine, in butterfly time or snowbound winter -- scenes all having the fresh native tang of nineteenth century New England.

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1 An Object of Love in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins page 274

Roadsides and Meadows An excellent picture of a bit of country road is given in A New England Nun. "There were harvest fields on either hand, bordered by low stone walls. Luxuriant clumps of bushes grew beside the wall and trees -- wild cherry and old apple-trees -- at intervals. Presently Louisa sat down on the wall and looked about her with mildly sorrowful reflectiveness. Tall shrubs of blueberry and meadowsweet, all woven together and tangled with blackberry vines and horse-briers, shut her in on either side".[1] In winter time the roads were buried under a blanket of snow knee-deep and in summer the dust often lay thick upon them. The Walpole road, over which Almiry and Mis' Green drove slowly in their old-fashioned chaise, is described as follows. "This road was not much travelled and grass was growing between the wheel-ruts; but the soil flew up like smoke from the horse's hoofs and the wheels. The blackberry vines climbing over the stone walls on either side and the meadow-sweet and hardhack bushes were powdered thickly with dust and had gray leaves instead of green. The big-leaved things, such as burdock, growing close to the ground, had their veins all outlined in dust".[2]

Sometimes the road ran through thinly settled districts, through a forest of pine and cedar and hemlock where one could travel several miles without seeing any habitation; again it passed through remote hamlets and friendly

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1 A New England Nun in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 12

2 On The Walpole Road in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 135

villages; and once in a while it would arrive at some emporium of rural trade. Such a town was Derby, mentioned in A Humble Romance, the center of trade for surrounding small towns, with its main street crowded on a fair day with any quantity of nondescript and antediluvian-looking vehicles.

On either side of the roads stretched meadows and fields changing in appearance with the changing seasons. Beyond them there might be a stretch of pine woods or a fringe of yellow birches, and sometimes against the horizon there arose a low range of misty blue hills. The story An Innocent Gamester gives us a glimpse of salt marshes, flooded by high tides but, the rest of the time, "a bare level burned by the sun and swept by the salt wind",[1] with pools of sea-water here and there and "great mats of long and sun-burned marsh-grass",[2] salt marshes stretching away to the blue line of the sea.

Spring Any adequate picture of the New England countryside must take into account its variable climate; and this Mary E. Wilkins has done, for she describes the landscape as it appears in the changing seasons. It was a sign that spring had come when the willow bushes that bordered the road began to bud and "new grass was springing and there was the smell of it in the air".[3]

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1 An Innocent Gamester in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 375

2 Ibid, page 376

3 Calla-Lilies and Hannah in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins page 33

Then the branches of the trees became a light green foam, "with their delicate garlands of new leaves and the new nests of song birds".[1] When the dandelions lost their golden crowns and the purple blooms of the lilacs were turning gray, buttercups blossomed out in the meadows. In early May "the air was full of sudden sweet calls of birds and the delicate rustlings of flowering boughs".[2] In Ephraim Cole's yard three blossoming peach trees in full pink bloom gave out an almond fragrance as they stirred in the wind. Apple trees were full of murmuring bees and above their murmur could be heard the spring rush of the river. It was a time when fields held a faint earthy odor as farmers toiled at their planting and when Silas Vinton set out his potted plants. In the evening the meadows were filled with the peeping of frogs and whippoorwills called from the woodland.

Summer Summertime, strange to say, is mentioned only a few times in the stories of Mary Wilkins. In hot weather the blinds and curtains of the parlor were drawn all day in order to keep the room cool and dark. A Poetess contains the following description. "The summer afternoon wore on. It grew warmer and closer; the air was full of the rasping babble of insects with the cicadas shrilling over them; now and then a team passed and a dust cloud floated over the

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1 A Village Singer in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 110

2 A Kitchen Colonel in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 427

top of the hedge".[1] In early summer the butterflies -- yellow ones, little rusty red ones, and gorgeous large ones with blue spots on their black wings -- hovered above the blossoming meadows where daisies and clover and tall grasses rustled in the wind.

Autumn In the autumn, fields that had been green with corn and potatoes showed ugly plough ridges and yellow corn stubble, and meadows that had been sweet with clover showed a waving crop of goldenrod. The thistles along the roadsides had white tops. The mown hay that drifted around Hetty as she stood in Caleb Gale's field was "like a brown-green sea touched with ripples of blue and gold by the asters and goldenrod".[2] "Thar's goin' to be a heavy frost, sure enough. I'll hev to git the squashes in",[3] declared Ann Millet as she looked at the clear, cold yellow sky showing between bleak violet-colored clouds in the west and noticed how distinctly the trees stood out in the clear air. One of the best descriptions of autumn is found in An Old Arithmetician. "A strong, soft south wind had been blowing the day before, and the trees had dropped nearly all their leaves. There were left only a few brownish-golden ones dangling on the elms, and hardly any at all on the maples. There were many

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1 A Poetess in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 147

2 A Church Mouse in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 409

3 An Object of Love in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 266

trees on the street and the fallen leaves were heaped high... The air was full of their odor, which could affect the spirit like a song, and mingled with it was the scent of grapes".[1]

Winter The New England winter, according to Miss Wilkins, was often beautiful. To be sure, there might be times of bitter cold or, early in the season, bleak, cheerless days when the ground was all bare and rigid and the sky covered with still, low clouds. Later there might come clear, cold mornings when the roads were glare and slippery, when the snow crust in the open fields shone and flashed, and tree boughs and twigs "were enamelled with ice".[2] On such days the air was stinging and the mountains "covered with frosty foliage full of silver and blue and diamond lights".[3] At other times, in the intense cold, "the snow creaked under foot, the air was full of sparkles, there were noises like guns in the woods";[4] the old timbers of houses cracked and the windows were thickly coated with frost. After a heavy storm, the snow lay knee deep on the roads and the boughs of trees and bushes, laden with white, bent so low that they almost touched the ground, while over the village

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1 An Old Arithmetician in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 368

2 Christmas Jenny in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 160

3 Ibid, page 163

4 A Solitary in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 224

"hung a spraying net-work of frosty branches".[1]

Sunset Although the countryside in the morning hours or at noon is almost never described in the stories of Miss Wilkins, we do catch glimpses of rural New England at twilight and at night. In the late afternoon as the light waned and little bells tinkled, working people plodded homeward -- blue-shirted laborers with shovels over their shoulders, farmers from the hayfields, men in calico shirt sleeves and shop girls in soiled dresses. The air might be full of bird calls and children's voices, while a clear yellow glow lingered in the west and "a dewy coolness" spread over everything.

Night Sometimes, as in Calla-Lilies and Hannah there came a windy, moonlit night when light clouds edged with yellow drove overhead. When the moon was full, "the road was bespread with a beautiful shifting dapple of silver and shadow and the air was full of a mysterious sweetness",[2] and the scent of wild grapes. When Ann Millet stood in her garden patch among the withered corn-stalks and mouldering squash vines all white with frost and called her lost cat, "there were northern lights streaking the sky; the stars shone steadily through the rosy glow; it was very still and lonesome and cold".[3]

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1 Christmas Jenny in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 163

2 A New England Nun in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 13

3 Two Old Lovers in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 272

THE VILLAGE

Places Merely Mentioned

In many respects the New England villages of the late nineteenth century were much alike with their farmhouses, white cottages and buildings of special importance. Some of these Mary E. Wilkins merely mentions; others she describes in more detail. We know that there were district schools, for several of the young girls in her stories taught there; we hear, too, of the town hall where the selectmen had their rooms and where such questions as raising taxes or putting in new water-works were discussed; and we find reference to taverns and a hotel, the latter being merely "an ordinary two-story house where two or three spare rooms were ample accommodation for the few straggling guests who came to this little rural place".[1] In some of the towns there were "shops". What they were like we do not hear; we only see men in calico shirt sleeves and girls in soiled dresses trudging home from them when the six o'clock whistle blew. The railroad station in many places was a small, isolated affair, not much more than a rude shed with a long bench where passengers waited.

Meeting-house

One of the most important landmarks in the old New England village was the small white meeting-house with its tall, steeple and five pointed windows on each side.

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1 A Gatherer of Simples in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 291

Hither,as the bell tolled its summons, the people flocked in their Sunday meetin' clothes and took their places in the pews of the audience room. There was a gallery, such as the one in which Hetty Fifield set up housekeeping until the aroma of her boiled dinner aroused the congregation to action; and next to the pulpit was a small lofty room where the minister hung his hat and where Hetty was finally allowed to make her home. Special "singing seats", the men and women members being separated, were reserved for the choir who sang at the morning and afternoon services but not in the evening. With the exception of the organist, the leading soprano was the only paid musician. Sometimes the little church was the scene of an unexpected human drama -- Hetty's pathetic, passionate plea for a spot she could call home, George Arnold's confession of the theft that had been blamed on Hannah Redman, Candace Whitcomb's revolt when, after forty years of service, she had been dismissed from the choir because her voice had grown cracked.

General Store and Postoffice

At the general store, described in A Stolen Christmas and A Solitary, one could buy all kinds of things -- matches, cornmeal, oil, toys, or whatever was needed. The door was heavy and partly of glass; and when it slammed to, the panels clattered. In one corner was the postoffice and in the

center a stove about which the village loafers gathered on a cold day to gossip or perhaps to ridicule an eccentric like Nicholas Gunn. On pleasant evenings the men sat on the piazza and talked. At Christmas time the room sent forth an odor of evergreen and new varnish, the walls were festooned with greens, and the counters were heaped with animals of sugar and wood, pink-faced, straight-bodied dolls, tin trumpets, and express wagons. To Margaret Poole "it was a very emporium of beauty and richness".[1]

Factories Leyden, a manufacturing town pictured in "Two Old Lovers", contained three old weather-beaten boot-and-shoe factories. They were ugly wooden buildings with outer walls that were "black and grimy, streaked and splashed and patched with red paint in every variety of shade, accordingly as the original hue was tempered with smoke or the beatings of the storms of many years".[2] About them had grown up a village of cottages of one or two patterns, painted uniformly white and having blinds of bright green. Every morning at seven the old men, young men and boys started out for the day's work where they could find plenty of time for gossip over their cutting and pegging.

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1 A Stolen Christmas in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 328

2 Two Old Lovers in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 27

Poorhouse When life proved too difficult and all means of support disappeared, the only solution was the dreaded poorhouse. A tragic thing it was to see some gentle old soul like Lavinia Dodge hoisted, a trembling, shivering little figure, into the covered wagon and driven off from the home that had once been hers. The almshouse in the story "Sister Liddy" stood on a bare, sandy lot of rising ground where there were "no leaves nor branches to cast shadows on its walls".[1] It was a new building Mansaid-roofed and well-painted, one in which the town took pride. When a bell announcing dinner clanged through the long corridors, on each side of which were the doors of paupers' bedrooms, everyone, except the young woman who washed dishes, hurried to the dining room. Seated on benches at board tables, the rows of paupers ate the coarse but abundant dinner with "a loud smacking of lips and gurgling noises",[2] raising their voices once in a while in imperious clamors while the overseer, at the end of one table, served. After the meal was finished and things were cleared away, the women gathered around the stove in their hot, close sittingroom, there to compare notes and to boast of the glories that had been theirs in a happier past.

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1 Sister Liddy in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 81

2 Sister Liddy in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 87

Conclusion: Man life proves the difficulty and all sense of surprise disappeared the only solution was the dramatic conclusion. A few is which it was to are some people old and life lavish have helped, a thousand, different little times, into the crowded room and daylight off from the lens that had some been here. The characters in the story "Water Lady" stand on a cliff, south but is rising ground where there was "no leaves and shrubs to work another on the walls". It was a non holiday Thursday-cracked and all-weather, one in which one knew that grey-blown a well accumulating at our disposal above a the long mountains, on such also he which was the house of property accident, evening, where the noise seemed all making dinner, buried to the dining room. Monday on walked at their walls. The room of Jupiter the [illegible] but always dinner with the local meadows of life and sensible noises". Malcolm Hale rubber was the while in [illegible] dinners while the overhead, at the end of the table, serving after the meal was finished and which was alcohol was the tower upstairs around the stone in [illegible] silence, silhouetted, there [illegible] the [illegible] the [illegible] the

Old Cemetery "The dark slate stones that now slant to their falls in the old burying-ground, or are fallen already, then stood straight. The old inscriptions, now blurred over by moss and lichen, or worn back into the face of the stone by the wash of the heavy coast rains, were then quite plain. The winged cherubim and death-heads.....were quite fresh from the artist's hands. The funeral urns and weeping-willows, a very art of sorrow in themselves, with their every curve the droop of a mourner's head, and all their flowing lines of tears, were still distinct".[1] Thus does Mary E. Wilkins describe the old-fashioned burying ground found in a late nineteenth century village. And she gives us the following verse that was cut on one of the tall slate stones:

"Stranger, view well this speaking stone,
And drop a pitying tear,
Ingratitude had overthrown,
And Death then laid me here".[2]

Sometimes the simple words "Our Father" and "Our Mother" were inscribed on the old folks' stones in a family lot.

The burying-ground might be set off from the road by thickly set hemlocks and pines and at the rear a

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1 The Buckley Lady in Silence; Mary E. Wilkins, page 55

2 Ibid, page 109

light wood with its silvery, twinkling leaves might silently encroach upon the neglected lots. In the spring flowering almonds and bridal wreaths blossomed into a tender beauty; and in the winter "the new snowflakes softly bent down the long slim sprays of the graveyard bushes until they lay on the ground; the mildewed fronts of the slanting old gravestones were hung with irregular, shifting snow-garlands".[1]

HOMES

Types of Homes

Much of the local color in the short stories of Mary E. Wilkins appears in her descriptions of the village homes in which occurred many of the incidents of her tales. These dwellings were of various types -- the "white-painted and piazzaed village mansion", the small house with its great barn and long reach of sheds and out buildings, the neat, comfortable cottage, the tiny, weather-beaten two-roomed home of some spinster, and the deserted old homestead.

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1 A Discovered Pearl in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 263

Cottage and Garden of Well-to-do

In general, the cottages of those who were fairly well-to-do were white with green blinds, although some were unpainted save for white strips around the windows. The side door, frequently used, opened into the kitchen attached to which was a lean-to or a shed used for wood or for rough work, like soap-boiling and washing. At the side there was often a garden patch with currant bushes or squashes or like that of Betsey Dole, "all a gay spangle with sweet peas and red-flowering beans and flanked with feathery asparagus",[1] and somewhere in the yard was a pump or a well with an old-fashioned well-sweep. The flower garden, separated from the road by a hedge of some kind, a low stone wall, or picket fence, sometimes "was divided into little fantastic beds edged with cobblestones".[2] Here, in triangles, hearts or rounds grew sweet-williams, pinks, rosemary, candy tuft and marigolds. Nasturtiums might fill the air with their peppery sweetness or portulacas make a splendid field of crimson and yellow. In the fall maple trees might scatter their bright leaves over the ground, and in the spring the fragrant peach trees might drop their petals; the purple blooms of the lilac bushes might stir in a May breeze or the dahlias nod their golden and red balls in October.

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1 A Poetess in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 140

2 A Wayfaring Couple in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 121

Pattern In general, the patterns of these rugs were
Text
Design fairly well-to-do were white with green
Jr.
Well-to-do Mitchell, although some more complicated were for
white edging around the edges. The side text, frequently
used, spread into the diagonal patterns, to which was a dance
to or a shadowed for wood or the kind of work, like spon-
taneous and needed. As the site there was often a pattern
with diagonal bands or patterns in line that of being
Dale, "all a man can do with wool yarn and a pair of scissors
has a and flowed with flowing expression."[1] The country
in the year was a lump of a wall with arcade-fashion
well-arched. The floor pattern, supported from the rest in
a form of [illegible], a low alcove wall, or a [illegible] lower
sometimes "was divided into little [illegible] made as and
with dolphin-shape."[2] Dr. In the [illegible], lower or [illegible]
rugs [illegible]-well-to-do, [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] and
[illegible]. Mechanism alone fill the air of [illegible] [illegible]
[illegible] or [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] of [illegible]
and [illegible]. In the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]
[illegible] leaves over [illegible], and in the [illegible], the [illegible]
[illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]; the [illegible]
[illegible] of the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] in a [illegible] [illegible]
[illegible] [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible] [illegible] [illegible].

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1 A Persian in A [illegible] [illegible] [illegible], [illegible] 1[illegible]

2 A Shepherd Clouds in A [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible], [illegible]
[illegible] 1[illegible].

And through the gay splashes of color a narrow foot path or more pretentious brick walk led from the road to the front door with its brass knocker. Over the front and one side of Esther Gay's little house, curtaining all the windows but one with green vines, climbed festoons of morning-glories; and against the little space of wall on one side of Aunt Fidelia's home stood a green trellis with sweet-smelling honeysuckle.

Lowly Home

Priscilla and Mary Brown, the two elderly sisters of A Far Away Melody lived in a tiny low cottage, dark-red in color except for the white facings around the windows and having only green paper curtains in place of blinds. The narrow entry ran from the front door to the back, there being on one side the kitchen, which also served as a living room and on the other a room where the sisters slept. Overhead were two small unfinished lofts reached by a step-ladder through a little scuttle in the entry ceiling. The beloved home of the Shattuck sisters was a tiny weather-stained affair, its walls full of chinks, its mossy roof leaky, and its old wooden doorstep sunken low down among the grasses.

Deserted Homestead

The old deserted homestead in A Wayfaring Couple stood in a cleared space by the country road several miles from any other dwelling. It was a large square building which had never been painted, the shingles

on its roof and walls scaling off and partly covered by a green film of moss, its front door standing open with a dreary show of hospitality. The few panes of glass that had not been broken from the front windows desolately reflected the red and gold of the sunset. The dingy, echoing rooms, the old barn with its rusty tools and dusty scaffolds, the phantom of an old sulky tottering on its two half-spokeless wheels, its covering in ribbons, the great apple tree by the kitchen door, with its dead limbs and small, knotty fruit -- all were desolate reminders of a life and happier days that had been but were now gone forever.

Kitchen Although some of the lowly cottages of spinsters had only a few rooms, most of the ordinary village homes boasted an entry, a sitting room, a best parlor, a kitchen, a pantry and bed rooms. The kitchen, which served as a dining room and, in cold weather, as a sitting room, is described in A Far-Away Melody as follows. "The shadows of their leaves made a dancing net-work over the freshly washed yellow floor. The two sisters sat there and sewed on some coarse vests all the afternoon. Neither made a remark often. The room, with its glossy little cooking stove, its eight-day clock on the mantel, its chintz-cushioned rocking chairs, and the dancing shadows of the lilac leaves on

its yellow floor looked pleasant and peaceful".[1] Often there was a calico-covered rocking chair by the window, and sometimes an old-fashioned desk like Caleb Childs' stood in a corner or a bureau on which were piled copies of the almanac or religious papers.

In Louisa's home, described in A New England Nun, "the little square table stood exactly in the centre of the kitchen and was covered with a starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened. Louisa had a damask napkin on her tea-tray, where were arranged a cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons, a silver cream pitcher, a china sugar bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer".[2] Louisa, as was whispered among her neighbors, used china every day while they, according to the general custom, laid their daily tables with common crockery and kept their sets of best china safe in the parlor closet. In other stories we find mention of thin silver tea-spoons, a glass butter dish, and a blue sugar bowl.

Bedroom In A Moral Exigency Miss Wilkins gives us an excellent description of a girl's bedroom in the parsonage. It was small, one side running in under the eaves, and had but one window "with a white cotton curtain trimmed with

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1 A Far-Away Melody in A Humble Romance; Mary E. Wilkins, page 213

2 A New England Nun in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 2

tasselled fringe and looped up on an old porcelain knob with a picture painted on it".[1] The scraggly-patterned wall paper, originally having blue roses on a satin ground, had lost its lustre, but in certain lights there was still a satin sheen and a blue line visible. The floor was covered with ancient straw matting, and one homemade braided rug lay beside the bedstead while another was before the stained-pine bureau. On the walls hung a splint letter-case, a motto worked in worsteds, and a gay print of a very proper little girl holding a faithful dog.

Love, in Amanda and Love, had for her sleeping room the large sunny front one with muslin curtains at the windows, a faded but clean woolen carpet on the floor, a bureau with a large looking-glass, and the best feather-bed.

After B. F. Brown in A Butterfly, had finished his painstaking but joyful preparations for the home-coming of his daughter, Viola, the picture presented by her room filled him with anticipatory happiness. The curtains at the two windows, having been washed and ironed, hung crisply in ruffling folds of muslin; on the bureau was a fresh white cover; and the bed was shiny white with its clean counter-pane and stiff pillow shams. A deep border and a little

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1 A Moral Exigency in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 220

white-and-gold picture molding ran around the new wall paper which had a white ground with a luster of satin, covered with garlands of blue-violets. On the walls hung a few simple pictures, some photographs, and two or three flower pieces which had come as prizes with periodicals.

Sitting Room

Whether or not some cottages had merely a sitting room and best parlor, Miss Wilkins does not make very clear; but she describes both. The following is a picture taken from The Twelfth Guest. "The sitting-room was warm and restrainedly comfortable with its ordinary village furnishings -- its ingrain carpet, its little peaked clock on a corner of the high black shelf, its red-covered card-table which had stood in the same spot for forty years. There was a little newspaper-covered stand, with some plants on it, before a window. There was one red geranium in blossom".[1] In the story Life Everlasting we get a glimpse of Mrs. Ansel's sitting-room with its brilliant carpet and gold wall paper, the shining air-tight stove, the tall gilded glass vases on a marble mantel-shelf, and a table lamp the shade of which was decorated with roses. An Innocent Gamester has mention of a printed red cloth on the table, a gilt-framed glass, an old-fashioned work-box with a gilt ball on each corner, and a large green-covered Bible.

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1 The Twelfth Guest in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 62

Feeling the urge to write Willie Caxton's obituary poem, Betsey Dole took her old black portfolio and pen and ink from the chimney cupboard. Then for hours, meditating and writing and intoning aloud the results of her efforts, she sat there in her little sitting room where the light was dim and green from the tall hadge before the windows and the walls were decorated with a framed sampler, a steel engraving of a female head taken from some old magazine,and sheaves of dried grass.

On the table in Louisa Ellis's cottage lay a square red autograph album, and in the south window a yellow canary fluttered about in a green cage.

Best Parlor

In some homes there was, besides the sitting-room, a best parlor used only on special occasions such as courting, weddings or funerals. Sometimes it was left closed up for a long period of time and often it had a peculiar "north room smell". In the parlor described in A Taste of Honey there were some flag-bottomed chairs set stiffly around, a large mahogany bureau in one corner, and an old-fashioned card table with Mrs. Heman's poems and the best lamp on a bead lamp-map. Besides Mrs. Heman's poems, which apparently were extremely popular, we hear, in various stories, of Mrs. Sigourney in red and gold, of a square red photograph album, and a Young Lady's Gift-Book. We find, too, mention of a "smart china mug with Friendship's Offering in gold letters;"[1]

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1 A Patient Waiter in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 401

a china card basket, and "a rude bracket holding a bouquet of wax flowers under a tall glass shade".[1]

A contrast in parlors is given in A Souvenir. Emmeline's, which had to serve also as a dressmaker's shop, was a rather poor little place with a worn rag carpet, cane-seated chairs, an old-fashioned bureau, and one black wooden rocker covered with chintz. A lamp with a pretty figured globe and a gilt and white china vase were on the mahogany card-table which, on week days, had to serve for cutting. Nancy Weeks, on the other hand, had a best parlor the glories of which thrilled her anew every time she opened the door. "There was a gilded paper on the walls, and a Brussels carpet with an enormous flower pattern on the floor. The furniture was covered with red plush -- everybody else in town had hair-cloth; plush was magnificent audacity. Every chair had a tidy on its back; there was a very large ruffled lamp-mat for the marble-top table; there were mats for the vases on the shelf, and there was a beautiful rug in front of the fireplace".[2] Most remarkable of all, however, was a wreath hanging on the wall, the rosebuds, lilies, pansies, poppies, acorns and leaves being made from the hair of Nancy Weeks' folks.

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1 A Solitary in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 217

2 A Souvenir in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 352

HOME LIFE OF WOMEN

House-Work

Here and there throughout the stories of Mary E. Wilkins we catch fragmentary glimpses of the home life of the women -- their work, recreations, evening tea, home remedies, and means of earning pin money. There were, of course, the meals to prepare with the cleaning up of the kitchen afterwards. Not only did this involve the clearing away and washing of the dishes, and perhaps the sweeping of the floor, but in a farmhouse there were the milk-pans to be washed as well. We hear Jonas Amesbury's mother remarking, "Well, I'm goin' in to set the bread a-risin'",[1] and Mis' Simonds saying, "I've been fryin' some doughnuts and I brought you over some warm".[2] We see old Charlotte Shattuck with a tin pan and old knife searching for dandelion greens among the short grass, Ann Millet bringing in her squashes before a frost, and Betsey Dole stringing and cutting beans while she talked to her visitor. Sarah Penn baked twice a week, for Adoniram often liked a piece of pie between meals; Aunt Lucinda's niece Charlotte house-cleaned in both spring and fall, taking up every carpet, hanging all the feather beds out of the windows, and dusting in all the dark corners.

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1 A Pot of Gold in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 181

2 A Mistaken Charity in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 238

Supper The meal most frequently mentioned by Miss Wilkins is supper or tea. Amelia, in A Gatherer of Simples, sat down at one end of her kitchen table to enjoy her evening meal of root-beer, coarse bread, and cold beans. The Babcock sisters could afford only bread, butter and tea, while Louisa Ellis who was fairly well to do had "a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily."[1] The supper that Lucy prepared for the returned prodigal, Gilman Marlow, is described as follows: "The fragrance of the tea stole into his nostrils. The nicely piled white bread gave out a sweet odor of its own. Lucy had set out her mother's china cups and saucers -- white, with a little green vine on the rims. She offered him her best damson sauce and her fruit cake".[2]

"Odd Jobs" Besides their regular housework, we find the women of Miss Wilkins' stories, especially the spinsters, doing "odd jobs" or little tasks for pleasure in their leisure moments. In the afternoon they would sit by the front window peacefully sewing or knitting and observing all that passed within their range of vision. The lack of a front window commanding a view of the road and passers-by was a source of considerable grief to Martha Patch who had little

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1 A New England Nun in A New England Nun; Mary E. Wilkins, page 2

2 A Discovered Pearl in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 261

enough to interest her. The story An Honest Soul mentions such tasks as piecing bed quilts, weaving rag carpets and braiding rugs. Nancy Weeks had spent many hours in making a gorgeous wreath of her folks' hair and Betsey Dole wrote poetry, poetry that, neatly written on little white rolls of writing paper or printed in country newspapers, was treasured on the shelves of her chimney cupboard. We catch a glimpse of gentle Miss Caroline Munson making her morning pilgrimage down the street after milk and working over the flower beds in her front garden; we see Louisa Ellis, in her flat straw hat with its green ribbon, filling a little blue crockery bowl with currants for her tea. Louisa "had a little still, and she used to occupy herself pleasantly in summer weather distilling the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint."[1] In The Scent of the Roses we find Clarissa May, filling a large brown jar with layers of rose leaves and salt and sprinkling in various spices.

Home Remedies

In a community where there was no telephone, no drugstore, no doctor who could be summoned at a moment's notice, it was necessary that the women-folk have on hand certain home remedies which they could apply themselves. A few of these Miss Wilkins mentions. Luella Norcross was making a pillow of life-everlasting blossoms

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1 A New England Nun in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 9

for Oliver Weed's asthma. Later, when the discovery of the murder shocked her so that she was ready to faint, her sister made a cup of hot peppermint tea for her to drink. Amanda, worried by Love's convulsive sobbing over her lost beau, declared: "I'll go an' heat a flat iron to put to your feet. It'll be kind of chilly upstairs to-night."[1] Poor old Fidelia, who was "shaky", put some catnip in her medicine to make it more quieting, and she used sage tea plentifully every day in the hope that it would bring the pretty golden color back to her gray hair. Gentian was considered a first-rate bitter and a good spring tonic. Mrs. Tollet put sprinklings of it in everything her husband ate when her husband was "afeelin' kinder poorly". Upon being asked whether she was sick, Martha Patch replied: "No, I ain't sick, only kinder all gone with the warm weather. I reckon I'll hev to fix me up some thoroughwort tea. Thoroughwort's a great strengthener."[2]

When Mrs. Muzzy, in A Tardy Thanksgiving, spilled boiling lard over her right foot she lost none of her resolute coolness in spite of the great pain, but, securing a pair of scissors that happened to be within readh, grimly cut off her shoe and stocking. Then, seeing how shockingly

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1 Amanda and Love in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 297

2 An Honest Soul in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 84

burned the foot was, she hitched herself laboriously along in her chair to the flour barrel in the buttery and powdered the wounded foot thickly with flour, the best she could do until some neighbor appeared and got oil and bandages.

Retiring At night before retiring, which was usually at an early hour, the village folk went about the house locking all the doors. Some, like Marg'ret Poole, always read a chapter of the Bible before going to bed.

MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD FOR WOMEN

Work of Men Scarcely Mentioned About the work of the men in the villages which she describes Mary E. Wilkins says very little. Some of them, of course, managed their own farms or hired out to others who were more prosperous than themselves; some worked in shops or factories; some were woodsawyers or garden laborers; and still others were storekeepers or peddlers. Concerning the means of livelihood for village women, especially spinsters or widows, she has a great deal more to say.

Income A few, like the Babcock sisters, owned their home with a bit of land and had a small income from money

in the village bank. The sum was hardly enough for a comfortable living and they starved daintily and patiently on it, mending their old muslins and Thibets and having but one best dress between them. Betsey Dole, too, had to content herself with very frugal meals, for her income, the interest at a low percent on a tiny sum left by her father, was infinitesimal. On the other hand, Esther Gay considered herself well to do with her pension of ninety-six dollars although there was not enough for anything besides necessities. By knitting reliable blue-yarn stockings and selling them to a dealer in the city, she managed to earn something extra, which, however, she did not use herself, but secretly contributed towards the support of a less fortunate neighbor. Clarissa May eked out the income of herself and her sister with a little sewing; and Amanda sold hay and vegetables and did heavy tasks in needlework for the neighbors.

Shop and Factory Work

Hatty, Esther Gay's granddaughter, worked in a shop -- what kind we do not know. Before her marriage Araminta May had worked in the Saunders Cotton Mills and in the story A Wayfaring Couple we see girls in their soiled dresses straggling home from the factory at sunset hour. When Hannah Redman found it impossible to get any more sewing to do after she had been accused of theft, she got a job sewing boots in the

factory at Wayne.

Tailoring and Sewing Sewing of various kinds was a very common means of earning a living for those who had no income. Until the time when boys began to wear "store clothes" many spinsters worked as tailoresses. The Brown sisters by such work had not only paid for their cottage but had been able to put quite a snug little sum in the bank. Harriet Shattuck "had gone about from house to house doing tailor-work after the primitive country fashion, and Charlotte had done plain sewing and mending for the neighbors. In the story A Souvenir Emmeline took in dressmaking to support herself and her mother and had all she could do. Sometimes little mats, tidies, pincushions, and other dainty fancy work "found quite a market among the village women and the storekeepers in a neighboring town".[1] Elvira, in A Pot of Gold, knitted a great deal of lace edging and sold yards of it to the people in the village; she also furnished a store with some. She had won for herself quite a local reputation, especially as it was rumored that she sometimes devised new patterns out of her head.

Millinery At the beginning of the story Life-Everlastin', we find ourselves in the shop of the village milliner who is attempting to sell a "real stylish bonnet" and is advising

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1 Amanda and Love in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 293

Mrs. Ansel to friz her hair out a little more in front as it needs to be "real fluffy an' careless" with that kind of bonnet. Then we see the milliner, who is rather short, stretching up, cocking her head and twisting her mouth to one side with a superior air while she arranges her customer's thin front locks.

Odd Jobs Forced to earn their own living, some of the spinsters described by Miss Wilkins did "odd jobs" for other women in the community. Martha Patch, though over seventy, did many housewifely jobs for her neighbors, such as weaving rag carpets, piecing bed quilts and braiding rugs. In order to give her small granddaughters enough to eat and to keep a roof over their heads, Marg'ret Poole sewed carpets, assisted in spring cleanings, and did anything for her neighbors to which she could turn a hand.

Peddling After Inez Morse's father died, the daughter carried on the farm, hiring very little help and selling the produce in the large market town of Bolton. We see her with her mother in a rusty open buggy drawn by a lop-eared white horse driving from house to house and selling her wares of butter, eggs, berries and honey at the doors. "She had a good many regular customers; her goods were always excellent and gave satisfaction though she had the name of being a trifle exacting in her bargains, and asking

as much as she possibly could."[1] When Sally's husband disappeared in the story A Humble Romance, with a fierce loyalty and courageous determination she carried on his work, driving in the tin-cart along the prescribed route, stopping at farmhouses, taking rags and selling tinware just as he had done. At first the unprecedented spectacle of a woman running a tin-cart business aroused much astonishment and many curious questions; but her customers, satisfied with her dignified explanations, grew used to the novelty of a tin-woman and liked her. Later she added to her regular stock various little notions such as pins, needles and thread.

Christmas Jenny, who owned a little house and a few acres of cleared land on the mountain, earned her living by peddling. We see her with weather-beaten face, deeply tanned and reddened, coming sturdily along the slippery road on a bitter cold day, long sprays of ground-pine wound around her shoulders, and evergreen wreaths filling her arms. She carried a basket holding many little bouquets of bright-colored everlasting flowers and dragged a sled on which was bound a small hemlock tree. She, too, had regular customers and peddled her wares from house to house in the village. "Every year, the week before Christmas, she came down

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1 A Taste of Honey in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 94

from the mountain with her evergreens. She was popularly supposed to earn quite a sum of money that way. In the summer she sold vegetables, but the green Christmas traffic was regarded as her legitimate business -- it had given her her name among the villagers."[1]

Farm Work Sometimes under the stress of necessity a woman had to do the farm work of a man. Louisa Britton, to keep her family from starvation, toiled like a European peasant woman on their stony acre of land, attempting to wrest a little sustenance from it. She even hired herself out, in spite of her mother's protests, and raked hay in a neighbor's field. Mrs. King, for love of her daughter Almira, worked in the field and garden like a man and scandalized some of the villagers by wearing dresses half way up to her knees and heavy cowhide boots and by having her hair cut short.

Teaching Many of the young girls who were well enough educated taught in the village school. Louisa Britton's financial troubles were for the most part ended when her mother greeted her one evening with the news: "Mr. Mosely has been here an' he wants you to take the school again when it opens next week."[2] The story Robins and Hammers

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1 Christmas Jenny in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 166

2 Louisa in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 405

gives us the following description of Lois Arms, who thought she shouldn't marry John Elliot until she had earned enough money to provide new dresses for herself and furniture for her new home. "So she got the district school to teach and passed the summer that way.....The school was half a mile from her home, and she had to keep the house tidy and get meals for her father, besides teaching, so she had to work hard. Back and forth she went, passing first the wild roses and then the golden-rod on the country road, morning and noon and night, never faltering."[1]

Gathering of Simples

Our first glimpse of Aurelia Flower is of her going along the road towards home at sunset, with a great sheaf of leaves and flowers in her arms. She was a "gatherer of simples", ransacking the woods for medicinal herbs and disposing of them to druggists in a neighboring town. The even profits which she made were small but more than enough for her to live on so that she was able to pay off the mortgage on her house. "Every room in her house was festooned with herbs; she knew every kind that grew in the New England woods, and hunted them out in their season and brought them home.....She loved her work and the greenwood things were to her as friends, and the

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1 Robins and Hammers in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 127

healing qualities of sarsaparilla and thoroughwort, and the sweetness of thyme and lavender seemed to have entered into her nature till she could almost talk with them in that way."[1]

SOCIAL LIFE AND CUSTOMS

Town-Meeting; Fire

It seems strange that Mary E. Wilkins, with her tendency towards a plain, unornamented style and meagreness of structure, should give us as much of an insight as she does into the social life and customs of New England in the late nineteenth century. Courting, weddings, and afternoon tea she treats with illuminating details; of other customs she gives us merely a glimpse. We hear, in A Kitchen Colonel, that notices were posted on trees announcing a town meeting about the new water works; we know what happened in case of fire -- how, when Uncle Enos's barn was struck by lightning, everybody "sot to" and helped put the blaze out, handing buckets of water up to the men on the roof; when Mrs. Ely's home was burning, the villagers were roused by hoarse shouts and the clanging of the church bell; men helped carry out goods

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1 A Gatherer of Simples in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, pages, 287, 288

and furniture; and sympathetic neighbors took the family into their homes.

Auction We see a weather-beaten cottage, the shingles scaling from the roof, the front yard overgrown with cinnamon rose-bushes, the fences leaning. A red flag fastened to a cherry tree in the side yard announced an auction. Four men with a show of ceremony took their places and one of them, who held a roll of papers, began to read. From the house came the sound of hysterical sobs and the wail of a shrill, weak, womanish voice: "Oh dear! oh dear me! dear me! .... Oh father what made you leave me? -- what made you die an' leave me?" In spite of the cries business had to proceed. "The auctioneer resumed his reading of the long statement of the condition of the sale; then the bidding began. That was soon over as there were only two bidders. The old man, who held the mortgage which had been foreclosed, bid with nervous promptness the exact amount of his claim. Then the man at the cherry tree bid a few dollars more, and he was proclaimed the purchaser."[1]

Travel and Transportation Means for travel and transportation in those days of half a century ago were few. There were no busses to take the children to the

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1 Cinnamon Roses in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 166

district school; instead, they walked, sometimes a distance of three miles. There was no rural free delivery; the village people had to go to the post office themselves. Fidelia, in A Patient Waiter, used to trudge the mile twice a day, year in and year out, taking with her a black broadcloth bag worked on one side with a wreath and on the other with a bunch of flowers; in this she carried mail to the dozen families between her house and the post office. A lumbering stage coach sometimes ran between villages or carried passengers to the distant railroad station. On several occasions we hear of a country youth taking his sweetheart to ride in a shiny buggy. In An Unwilling Guest we hear that "Mrs. Steele's vehicle was a covered wagon. There was no opening except in front; the black curtains buttoned closely over the back and sides. Susan sat, every nerve rigid, on the glossy back seat and clutched the one in front firmly. Mrs. Steele sat there driving in a masterly way, holding the lines high and taut, her shoulders thrown back".[1]

Parties Picnics Entertainments

There were parties, picnics and entertainments of various kinds. Willy Linfield beginning his courting, invited Inez Morse to go with him to

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1 An Unwilling Guest in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 341

hear the bell-ringers perform in the town hall; and it was at a picnic that Anne May met her sister's old beau, Gilman. Anne, dressed for the occasion, wore a "broad-brimmed white straw hat trimmed with fine pink flowers. Her ruffled, pink-flowered muslin gown fluttered crisply. She had pinned some pink rose buds at her throat."[1]

A Gala Dress contains a description of a Fourth of July picnic with banging fire-crackers, tooting horns, crashing cannon and speeches by local celebrities. When a surprise party was given to Candace Whitcomb, all the choir arrived at her house about eight o'clock, bringing cake and oranges with them and leaving behind as a gift a photograph album. We find mention in A Moral Exigency and A Village Singer of mission bands, church sociables, singing-schools, and choral clubs.

Prayer Meeting

Sometimes the women folk gathered at a neighbor's house for a mid-week prayer meeting. Such a one was held in Mrs. Thomas's home. As Mrs. Wheat and Rebecca came up the front walk between the phlox bushes, the front door stood open and one or two mildly curious faces showed through the windows. There was a solemn composure on the hostess's large, comfortable face as she greeted the arrivals. With staid demeanor they walked in and took their

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1 The Scent of the Roses in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 198

seats in the best parlor where the chairs were set close to the walls around the room. The meeting began. "The good women read in the Bible and prayed, one after another, the others silent on their knees beside her. Their husbands and sons in the hay fields, the children in the district school, the too light-minded though innocent village girls, the minister wrestling with his dull sermon faithfully in his shabby study, the whole world were remembered in their homely petitions."[1]

Afternoon Tea

Sometimes one of the ladies entertained her neighbors in the afternoon and served tea. According to the story A Symphony in Lavender, Miss Caroline Munson's guests arrived about three o'clock, as was the custom in Ware. Having been greeted with a simple courtesy and pleased shyness, they were ushered into the beautiful old parlor where they seated themselves with their sewing. There they remained for some time making what conversation they could. Later they had tea in the dining room which was "as charming in its way as the parlor, large and dark and solid, with some beautiful quaint pieces of furniture in it. The china was pink and gold;"[2] and the table linen had probably been spun by Miss Munson's grandmother and put away in a big chest with rose leaves between the folds.

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1 In Butterfly Time in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, pages 317, 318

2 A Symphony in Lavender in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 42

One afternoon Marm Lawson, who was seventy, had company to tea, three women near her own age. "Her withered, aged figure sat up pert and erect at the head of the table, pouring the tea from the shiny britannia teapot into the best pink china cups. She never leaned back in a chair; there seemed to be a kind of springy stiffness about her spine which forbade it. Her black cashmere gown fitted her long, shrunken form as tightly and trimly as a girl's; she had on her best cap, made of very pretty old figured lace with bows of lavender satin ribbon.....Her three guests sat each at one of the three remaining corners of the square table....Conversation did not flow very glibly among the guests, though they were ordinarily garrulous enough old souls. When they spoke it was precisely, and not like themselves. Every nerve in them was braced up to meet the occasion with propriety. This state afternoon, Marm Lawson's china tea-cups, and company damson sauce and pound cakes, coming right in the midst of their common every days, were embarrassing and awe-inspiring".[1]

Christmas and Thanksgiving

Little is said in the stories of Mary E. Wilkins about Thanksgiving. We only hear that it was a time for turkey and plum pudding. Concerning

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1 Brakes and White Vi'lets in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, pages, 107,108

Christmas in the 1890's more information is given. At that time of year Christmas Jenny came down from the mountain with wreaths and evergreen, long sprays of ground pine, and little bouquets of bright-colored everlasting flowers to sell to the villagers as decorations for their homes. The counters in the village store were heaped with sugar animals, tin trumpets and dolls and the walls were festooned with greens. On Christmas Eve Margaret Poole filled the little stockings that hung beside the chimney with candy, pink sugar cats and birds, and toys. The dinner, mentioned in Christmas Jenny, consisted of roast turkey, turnips, onions and plum pudding. The story A Moral Exigency tells us of the preparations that were made for the sociable and tree to be given at the parsonage in honor of Christmas Eve, of the corps of indefatigable women who had sewed up little lace bags with divers-colored worsteds and stuffed them with candy, who had strung pop-corn and marked the parcels which had been pouring in since daybreak from all quarters, and who had finally hurried home at five o'clock leaving the tree fully bedecked in the parsonage parlor.

Sickness and Death

The home remedies used by the country folk --catnip, gentian, thoroughwort tea -- have been dealt with under Home Life of Women. Any one who was very sick was cared for by members of the family or relatives, as

hired nurses were rare in those isolated little villages. When Betsey Dole who had no folks of her own lay seriously ill, "Mrs. Caxton came voluntarily and took care of her, only going home to prepare her husband's meals. Betsey's bed was moved into the sitting room, and the neighbors came every day to see her and brought little delicacies."[1] When the last sickness ended in death, the bell in the white-steepled church tolled solemnly and a little funeral procession made its way to the cemetery with its mossy, leaning stones. Relatives of the departed usually dressed in black for the funeral, and the whole village was scandalized when old Richard Stone's wife wore a brown dress and his daughter appeared in green with a blue flower in her bonnet. To be buried by the town was something of a disgrace. In a corner of a tall mahogany bureau Old Lady Pingree had hidden a little hoard of money to pay for her burying. She had been saving it up, a few cents at a time, for twenty years; and, with a pathetic pride, she wanted to be buried independent in the old Pingree lot and have a flat stone like the rest of her folks.

Courting Of an old-fashioned courting Miss Wilkins gives us a very clear picture. Often it started when the youth

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1 A Poetess in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 156

joined the waiting line of young men in the church vestibule after a Sunday night service and escorted the girl of his fancy to her home, perhaps going in for a call. Sometimes, if he owned a shiny buggy he took her to ride, thereby rousing the comments of the village folk. When the Sunday evening calls became a regular thing, neighbors began to look forward to a wedding. The "sitting up" was usually done in the parlor where, in winter, a fire was kindled and the lamp lighted at dusk. When Inez Morse, who had swept and dusted the parlor which hadn't been opened since her father's funeral, told her mother she thought she'd better "slick up" a little as Willy Linfield said he might drop in a while on Sunday night, the older woman exclaimed: "My sakes, Inez, you don't say so! You have got a beau sure as preachin'. Your father kept right on reg'lar after we once set up of a Sunday night."[1]

A young girl, expecting a beau, put on her best dress and ribbons and perhaps sprinkled some cologne on her handkerchief. A Pot of Gold describes the dress of the village youth about to make a Sunday night call. "When Jonas came downstairs, he had on his best suit; his curly hair was damp and trained in careful locks over his

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1 A Taste of Honey in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 99

smooth young forehead; his cheeks were fresh and rosy; he held his neck stiffly in his clean collar and white necktie."[1] Other stories mention shiny shoes and a nosegay in the buttonhole. Amanda and Love and Two Old Lovers give us a glimpse of a young man sitting gravely and stiffly on a slippery hair-cloth sofa, his unoccupied masculine hands on his knees, while the girl sitting in a cane-seated rocker crocheted on her tidy.

Weddings "Sitting up" together in the parlor "reg'lar" on Sunday evenings usually led to a wedding. On that occasion, according to A Conflict Ended, the bride wore a new pearl-colored silk gown and a white plumed bonnet, sometimes trimmed with roses. A trousseau was not complete without two silk dresses, a black one and a colored one, perhaps a blue-sprigged muslin, and a good stock of clothes. Wedding guests wore their Sunday best; and A Conquest of Humility shows us Mrs. Thayer appearing in her nicely kept cinnamon-brown silk and Milly in freshly starched white muslin. Two o'clock was the hour set for Delia Caldwell's wedding. The guests assembled in the two square front rooms, in one of which the presents were displayed on a mahogany

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1 A Pot of Gold in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 196

table -- a few bits of silver, a toilet set, and a great number of mats and tidies made by female relatives. In A Village Lear we catch a glimpse of several covered wagons hitched out in the yard during the ceremony, of Annie appearing in her wedding dress of white muslin, full of delicate frills and loops of ribbon, and her white bonnet with its bows and plumes, of the young couple in the groom's glossy buggy with its bay horse driving away to their new home ten miles away while everybody shouted merrily after them.

The story A Kitchen Colonel gives the following description of a wedding. "Fannie was married in October. There was quite a large evening wedding, and Mrs. Lee had wedding cake and pound cake and tea and coffee passed around for refreshments. Fanny and her bridegroom were standing before the minister, who had already begun the ceremony. Fanny, all in white, bent her head delicately under her veil; her cheeks showed through like roses. The bridegroom kept his handsome boyish face upon the minister with a brave and resolute air. Abel and his wife stood near with solemn and tearful faces. The four boarders stood together in a corner. The rooms were crowded with people in creaking silks and Sunday coats, and the air was heavy with cake

and coffee and flowers.....The happy bridal couple rode away through the October night; the wedding guests chattered merrily in the parlor and flocked gayly down the street."[1]

DRESS OF WOMEN

Dresses for Work The various styles of dress for women in the late nineteenth century are described in many of the stories of Mary E. Wilkins, although little is said about the costume for men in those days. We catch a glimpse of Elsie Mills, as she plasters the front door of her home with brilliant blue paint, standing on a chair -- a small lean figure in clinging calico. When Althea Rose hurried over to Silas Vinton's to get some parsnips for her mother, she dangled a little stiff white sun-bonnet by the strings, and "her dark calico dress was so prim in its cut that it almost acquired an individuality from it. She was only sixteen, but the skirt touched the ground and hid her little coarsely shod feet. The waist was long and slim and kept back all her pretty curves."[2]

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1 A Kitchen Colonel in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, pages 446,447

2 A Lover of Flowers in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 194

Lily, as she swept the front walk in the story A Patient Waiter, wore a blue gingham apron so long that it whisked about her legs. All the village was scandalized at the man's straw hat and short calico dress worn by Almira King as she worked in field and garden. When Hannah, returning from work in the shoe factory, "laid aside her thick faded shawl, she showed a tall young figure in a clinging old woollen gown of a drab color."[1]

Afternoon Dresses

In the afternoon, when the village women sat sewing at their front windows or went to a neighbor's house for an informal call and chat, they wore dresses somewhat better than those in which they had been doing their morning housework. Charlotte Steadman, going to call on her sister Nancy, had on a plain black and white checked gingham; and the two Brown sisters, after they had finished their noon meal and cleared away the dishes, put on clean starched purple prints. In Gentian we read of Hannah anxiously smoothing her stiffly starched calico gown which sprang and rattled as she walked. Lucinda "was lean and delicate in flimsy old black muslin and a shiny old black silk apron. She wore a tumbled muslin kerchief around her neck and had lax, faded curls behind her ears."[2] On the other hand, Miss Caroline

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1 Calla-Lilies and Hannah in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 102

2 An Innocent Gamester in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 364

Munson, who was well-to-do wore a delicate old-fashioned lilac muslin with a waist which was cut surplice fashion and had a dainty lace handkerchief tucked into it.

Aprons and little lace caps were quite fashionable for afternoon wear. Louisa Ellis in A New England Nun had on at one time as many as three aprons -- a green gingham which, together with a flat straw hat, was part of her costume when she picked currants for tea, a shorter pink and white print, and last of all her company apron, white linen with a little cambric edging on the bottom. When hurrying over to a neighbor's, one often put on a bonnet or hood and shawl.

Best Dresses

Then, too, there were "best dresses" for special occasions, such as Mrs. Thayer's cinnamon-brown silk and Milly's freshly starched muslin worn to Delia Caldwell's wedding, or Eunice Fairweather's "best brown cashmere with its ruffle of starched lace in the neck."[1] Sprigged muslins were worn by young girls at prayer meetings or picnics. Hatty Gay's meeting gown was of light brown delaine and her white meeting hat was trimmed with light brown ribbons and blue flowers. Although some of the poorer women had to content themselves with black

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1 A Moral Exigency in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 223

alpaca, black silk was most popular. In A Discovered Pearl, Marlow was quite awed by Lucy's best black silk with its full white ruche around the neck, its cunning loopings, and the flutter of black lace on the over-skirt; and for the Christmas social at the parsonage the minister's wife was "arrayed in her best -- a shiny black silk, long in the shoulder seams, the tops of the sleeves adorned with pointed caps trimmed with black velvet ribbon."[1] A Conflict Ended contains the following description of a spinster on her way to church. "She was a small, bony woman in a shiny purple silk, which was strained very tightly across her sharp shoulder-blades. Her bonnet was quite elaborate with flowers and plumes."[2]

Weddings and Funerals According to various stories by Miss Wilkins, brides in the late nineteenth century usually wore pearl-colored silk or white muslin full of delicate frills and loops of ribbon. The wedding bonnet, quite elaborate, was white, adorned with ribbons, flowers or plumes. In respect to Richard Stone, Hannah Turbin, in One Good Time, wore to the funeral a black silk gown, a black ladies'-cloth mantle, a black velvet bonnet trimmed

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1 A Moral Exigency in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 222

2 A Conflict Ended in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 383

with black flowers and a black lace veil. Mrs. Wheat, in preparation for the same funeral, "got a black shawl which had belonged to her mother out of the chest where it had lain in camphor and hung it on the clothesline to air. She also removed a spray of bright velvet flowers from her bonnet and sewed in its place a black ostrich feather. She found an old crepe veil, too, and steamed it into stiffness."[1]

Obsolete Gowns Sometimes spinsters who had little money for new clothes had to treasure what old ones they had and so appeared in dresses obsolete even for the little country villages where they lived. Clarissa May in The Scent of the Roses wore on summer afternoons an old-fashioned gown that had belonged to her mother -- cotton of a mixed green and white pattern, with a straight full skirt and long prim body. Amelia, trudging home with her leaves and flowers at sunset, had on a limp black straw hat and a dress with a green underskirt and a brown over-skirt and basque of obsolete cut. Poor old Susan Lawson, unable to afford a new hat, was rather sensitive about her flat Neapolitan bonnet with its little tuft of feathery green grass and grass green strings. When Betsey Dole went down the road, her

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1 One Good Time in Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins:Mary E. Wilkins, page 83

feet were cloth-gaitered and her hands black-mitted. She wore her thinnest dress -- "an old delaine with delicate bunches of faded flowers on a faded green ground. There was a narrow green belt ribbon around her long waist. She wore a green barege bonnet, stiffened with rattans scooping over her face, with her curls pushed forward over her thin cheeks in two bunches, and she carried a small green parasol with a jointed handle."[1]

ATTITUDE OF MIND AND CHARACTER OF PEOPLE AS GROUP

Narrow and Locally Conservative

The New England villagers depicted by Mary E. Wilkins were, on the whole thrifty, hardworking people, rather narrow and puritanic in their attitude. The women "had a strong local conservatism"[2] and eyed strangers suspiciously long before they admitted them to their social circle. In The Twelfth Guest a forlorn young girl in faded and dingy woollens appeared unexpectedly at the Childs' home on Christmas and someone insisted that the stranger join the family at the table

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1 A Poetess in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 149

2 A Conquest of Humility in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins page 427

instead of having some dinner alone by the stove. According to Miss Wilkins, "there was a slight flutter of consternation among the guests. They were all narrow-lived country people. Their customs had made deeper grooves in their roads; they were more fastidious and jealous of their social rights than many in higher positions."[1]

Suspicious of the Unusual

Brought up in the narrow confines and restricted outlook of their isolated villages, the country folk of the late nineteenth century were suspicious of everything unusual. There were strange rumors that Christmas Jenny, living in a lonely house on the mountains, had birds and rabbits shut up in cages and half starved them and that she mistreated the little deaf and dumb boy who lived with her. So strong was the rumor that the minister and Deacon Little went up to investigate. "Everything out of the broad, common track was an horror to these men and to many of their village fellows. Strange shadows that their eyes could not piece lay upon such, and they were suspicious. The popular sentiment against Jenny Wrayne was originally the outcome of this characteristic, which was a remnant of the old New England witchcraft superstition."[2] When Araminta May

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1 The Twelfth Guest in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 58

2 Christmas Jenny in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 173

appeared at the Bassets' home having dragged her sick husband over the rough country road in an old sulky, the woman at the door first viewed her with curious suspicion, which, however, soon gave way to sympathy. In A Humble Romance the unprecedented spectacle of a woman driving a tin-cart and peddling its wares gave rise to much astonishment and many curious questions among the customers.

Shocked at Lack of Conventionality

Lack of conventionality in one of their number rather shocked the village folk of New England. Esther Gay, who was deaf and couldn't hear the preaching, stayed home on Sundays and by knitting socks earned extra money for charity; but the neighbors did not in the least approve. In fact, the courting of Hatty Gay and Henry Little was broken off because of the latter's mother. "She told Grace's mother she didn't want her son to marry into that Gay tribe anyhow. She didn't think much of 'em. She said any girl whose folks didn't keep Sunday and stayed away from meetin' and worked wouldn't amount to much."[1]

Mrs. Muzzy had suffered one misfortune after another. Her son John had died of quick consumption two

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1 An Independent Thinker in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 304

years before; his daughter Caroline followed him some time later; her husband had fallen to his death from a scaffold during the summer. Embittered and rebellious against fate and firmly convinced that she had nothing to be thankful for, she made up her mind not to keep Thanksgiving either with relatives or at home. She was no hypocrite. Instead of sitting down to turkey and plum pudding and pretending to thank the Lord, she would stay at home and do her pig-work. The effect upon the neighbor of such an unconventional attitude is vividly described by Miss Wilkins. "The old lady's small-featured countenance, from its very mechanism, was incapable of expressing any very strong emotion, but it took on now a look of gentle horror. She dropped her knitting work, and her dim blue eyes seemed to take up the whole of her spectacles.

'Lor' sakes, Mis' Muzzy! Pig-work on Thanksgivin'-day! I never heerd anything like it!'"[1]

Curious Another outstanding characteristic of the people in Mary E. Wilkins' stories is curiosity. According to Brakes and White Vi'lets, when Marm Lawson, having started off for a week's visit with her son, arrived home unexpectedly the next morning, the neighbors came running in, wild to

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1 A Tardy Thanksgiving in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 50

know the meaning of it all. Great was the interest aroused by the murder of old Oliver Weed and his wife. In a short time teams were hurrying along the road; men rushed up to Luella, who had brought the news, and questioned her; the field around the house of the victims was black with people. The disappearance of Aunt Lucinda, aroused much curiosity in a community where anything exciting seldom happened. Charlotte had no sooner begun her frantic search and inquiries than some of the neighbors came running in, the men in shirt-sleeves and the women in calico gowns and aprons, for they had just risen from the table. They stared breathlessly and then, circling around Charlotte, asked question after question.

Eager for Spreading News and for Gossip

Together with curiosity went a desire to gossip and to spread a story as rapidly as possible. The very next day after Sarah Penn, in The Revolt of Mother, had moved her possessions from her small shabby home into the spacious new barn, men were talking the matter over in the village store and women with shawls over their heads were hurrying into neighbors' houses, leaving their morning's work undone. In A Wayfaring Couple, the story of sick David's journey in the old sulky drawn by his wife spread fast through the Bassets. For nearly forty years David Emmons had been courting Maria Brewster, calling at her house every Sunday night punctually at eight o'clock.

"Among the younger and more irreverent portions of the community there was considerable speculation as to the mode of courtship of these old lovers."[1] When David finally fell seriously ill, the news spread rapidly through the village; and by the time Almira reached the cottage there was a crowd around it. Sometimes the gossip was the kind that stung and hurt. Public opinion, which was frankly expressed, could be rather harsh and cruel. The choir singers tittered and whispered about Almira King's over-elaborate dress; and Delia Caldwell, when jilted, had to endure covert ridicule and galling sympathy. Although Hannah Redman was innocent, she was suspected of stealing some money when she was sewing at John Arnold's house. The fact was never proved, but nevertheless everybody in town firmly believed she took it and no one would give her any more work or have anything to do with her. The rumor even spread about that she had stolen "lots of pieces". Deprived of work, looked down upon, ostracized, the girl was driven to the verge of starvation. Such was public opinion and gossip in one old New England town. When Nicholas Gunn, the eccentric old solitary, appeared at the village store, the loafers laughed at him.

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1 Two Old Lovers in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, pages 30,31

Kindly and Ready to Help

However, in spite of this tendency to hurt and to be unfair at times, the New England villagers of nearly half a century ago, often proved themselves kindly folk, ready to help any one in trouble. The Shattuck sisters, living in a tiny house with a small garden patch were extremely poor, especially since they could no longer work, Charlotte's eyes having failed her and Harriet having suffered from rheumatic fever. According to Miss Wilkins, however, "the people about, who were mostly farmers and good friendly folk, helped them out with their living. One would donate a barrel of apples from his abundant harvest to the two poor old women, one a barrel of potatoes, another a load of wood for the winter fuel, and many a farmer's wife had bustled up the narrow foot-path with a pound of butter or a dozen fresh eggs or a nice bit of pork."[1]

Old Lady Pingree was very proud and would accept no presents that were openly proffered; but neighbors, bringing the old woman pay for knitted stockings, often left in the entry a basket packed with eatables. Mrs. Dunn and Flora, discovering the unhappiness and terror of little Nancy Wren who was an inmate of the poorhouse, took her home

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1 A Mistaken Charity in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 237

to live with them. Mr. White, the owner of the general store, knowing how poor Margaret Poole was and seeing her look wistfully at various toys and candies, did a bundle up for her as a present. Then, too, when anyone who lived alone was sick in the community, neighbors watched at the bedside and brought in little delicacies.

TYPES OF CHARACTER AMONG MEN

Human Background of Character Types

Besides the New England background of countryside, homes, and customs, the stories of Mary E. Wilkins give us a human background of men and women, of character types belonging to the isolated villages and manufacturing towns of the last part of the nineteenth century. We find there gentle elderly sisters, conscience-ridden old maids, domineering mothers, pathetic old men and stubborn eccentrics. Among the women there is a greater variety of types than among the men -- Miss Wilkins, for some reason always has more to say about the women folk in her stories; but in all of them, male or female, we are given a glimpse of wistful yearnings, strange perversities, forgivable weaknesses or quiet strength; and all of them are intensely human.

Thrifty Hard-working Type

Among the men the first character that presents itself is the thrifty, hardworking, farmer. We get only a glimpse of him here and there vaguely seen in the shadowy background of some stories. He works in the hayfield or plants his peas or digs potatoes; perhaps he brings in the water or, if there is no boy in the family, chops up the kindling wood. It is because of his steady, honest toil that some elderly unmarried daughter or gentle old wife finds herself, after his death, the owner of a small home and the recipient of a comfortable income from money in the village bank. He joins the excited group of villagers at the time of a fire and helps carry out his neighbor's property, or he goes to town meetings to discuss questions of interest to the community. From Adoniram in The Revolt of Mother we get some idea of how reticent and undemonstrative this hardworking type could be. When he did not care to explain himself or his actions, he paid no attention to his questioner or shuffled out of the room or retorted, "I ain't got nothin' to say." Although fond of his wife, Adoniram showed no sign of affection either at his departure on the trip of several days or at his return.

Pathetic Old Man

Probably in almost every village there could be found some pathetic old man like aged Barney

Swan, once a patient, hardworking shoemaker who had accumulated quite a little property, but now useless and despised, relegated to a corner by the children to whom he had turned over his property. A sad figure he made with his thin white hair and innocent, infantile expression. "On week days he wore his brown calico shirt sleeves and his old sagging vest. His bagging, brownish black trousers were hauled high around his waist, and his ankles showed like a little boy's."[1] He owned only one decent coat, which he kept for Sundays; and as his daughters gave him no money to spend, he had only his little earnings. We see him sitting by the cooking stove in the kitchen and poring miserably over the almanac or religious newspaper, or holding out a stick of candy and trying to coax to him a small grandson who cared nothing for him. We see him exiled to his dim little shop in the yard during Annie's wedding, peering wistfully through the cobwebbed window panes with his dim old eyes.

Louisa Britton's grandfather was another such character, a childish old man who knew no better than to dig up the potatoes Louisa had just planted. Miss Wilkins describes him as follows. "There was nothing for supper

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1 A Village Lear in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 273

but some bread and butter and weak tea, though the old man had his dish of Indian-meal porridge. He could not eat much solid food. The porridge was covered with milk and molasses. He bent low over it and ate large spoonfuls with loud noises. His daughter had tied a towel around his neck as she would have tied a pinafore on a child. She had also spread a towel over the tablecloth in front of him, and she watched him sharply lest he should spill his food."[1]

Lovers Of the lovers there are three often-mentioned types -- the shy, steady-going young man, the boy who proves untrue, and the man who has remained loyal through the passing years. To the first group belong those village youths who managed their own farms, were clerks in the general store, or worked in the factories; who waited outside the church after evening meeting to see their sweethearts home or called regularly on Sunday nights. We hear from their lips no passionate avowals of love such as are generously scattered through the "talkies" or novels of today. Those country swains, judging from Miss Wilkins' stories, had little to say; they were as undemonstrative and reticent about their love as they were about other

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1 Louisa in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page388

matters. Dressed in their Sunday suits, clean dickie collars and shining shoes, they sat stiffly on the hair cloth sofa talking bashfully or remaining silent.

Lawrence Thayer, in A Conquest of Humility, belonged to those who were untrue. Really fond of Delia Caldwell, he became so infatuated with Olive Briggs, an out of town girl, that he locked himself up in his room on his wedding day and, in spite of the protests and appeals of his parents, refused to come out. At Delia's house the relatives bidden to the festivities waited for several hours in the front rooms, wondering, gossiping. When Olive in turn jilted Lawrence, he went about doggedly in spite of the open rudeness and covert ridicule. "He was", says Miss Wilkins, "strong in silence, but he had a sweet womanish face which showed the marks of words quickly....He was a quiet, shy young man, who liked to stay at home with his parents and never went about much with the young people. Before Olive came he had seldom spoken to any girl besides Delia. They had been together soberly and steadily ever since their school days."[1]

A Taste of Honey tells of Willy Linfield, a dandified young fellow who kept company with Inez Morse.

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1 A Conquest of Humility in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 430

Inez, having promised her dying father to pay off the mortgage on the farm, asked her lover to wait until she had fulfilled her promise. For a long time Willy was faithful, but towards the end of the third year he would miss a Sunday night once in a while. When Inez, having paid off the last of the mortgage, went joyfully to tell him the news, she learned that Willy had gone that very day to marry another girl.

Cinnamon Roses gives us, in the person of William Havers, a glimpse of the loyal lover who for years had cared in silence. When Elsie Mills' home was to be sold at auction, it was he who bought it, because he wanted to do something for her and hoped she would go on living in it. The story ends with the marriage of the middle-aged couple. In Silas Vinton, the gentle, simple grower of flowers, we find another example of the loyal lover. Althea Rose, his sweetheart, not only begged him to release her from the engagement, but allowed the village people to think that Silas had jilted her. In spite of the fact that he was mercilessly badgered and scorned as a result of the rumor, Silas kept on loving the girl who had treated him so abominably. When Althea was married to another man, it was noticed that the blossoms on Silas's plants were all gone. In reply to a child's question about them, the simple-hearted, loyal fellow replied, "They've gone to a

weddin',deary."

The Eccentrics

The eccentrics are extremely interesting, rather amusing and yet at the same time rather pathetic. They are narrow-minded individuals with their ideas of right and wrong somewhat warped. Having once made up their minds to a certain idea, they cling to it obstinately, their common-sense so overbalanced by will that they fail to see the absurdity of their position. Nicholas Gunn, the stern anchorite, lived in a poorly furnished little shack, half starving himself and shunning the society of man. Having been hurt by those he loved, he determined to escape from future trouble by not caring anything for anybody. When Alferd, in Gentian, learned that his wife had deceived him by secretly putting bitters into his food as a spring tonic, he went to the village store, made a number of purchases, and in stubborn silence began to prepare his own breakfast. In answer to his wife's question as to whether he never wanted her to cook for him again, he replied: "No; I'm afeard of gettin' things that's bitter.....In futur I'm agoin' to cook my vittles myself, and that's all thar is about it." Marcus Woodman, having in a temper declared he'd "set" on the church steps fifty years before he'd enter the church of Mr. Morton was settled

there, kept his foolish vow. Sunday after Sunday, in rain or shine, he sat on the steps during service time. Esther, understanding his mulish obstinacy, said of him: "He's got too much will for his commonsense, that's all, and the will teeters the sense a little too far into the air."[1]

The Village Minister

In many of the stories there appears the character of the village minister. Whether he happened to be a visionary young man just starting out in his career or an old man somewhat wearied by years of faithful service, he was, in most respects, always the same. He struggled along on a too small salary of several hundred dollars a year, sometimes trying to support a family on it and living in a small, leaky parsonage. With his shabby, threadbare suit of black and rather meek, apologetic demeanor, he made anything but a prepossessing appearance. He could quote the scriptures on occasion and could give stereotyped sermons in the village church; he was very godly, very orthodox. But when he suddenly came up against some intensely human problem, some unconventional, unprecedented situation, he was helpless. In accordance with his duty, he came to call when Mother revolted and moved her household goods into the new barn, when Ann Millet refused to go to meeting, when Candace Whitcomb took

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1 A Conflict Ended in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 388

her strange revenge of drowning out her rival's singing. With orthodox remarks and platitudes he tried to soothe the fiery old maids; but against the volcanic rebellion in those usually gentle souls, a red-blooded, understandingly human man was needed; the pious, anemic village minister of the nineteenth century as described by Miss Wilkins was powerless.

TYPES OF CHARACTER AMONG WOMEN

Greater Variety of Types — Repressed old maids, jilted sweethearts, fastidious, peace-loving spinsters, domineering wives or mothers -- these are some of the types of character found in the tales of Mary E. Wilkins. There is a greater variety and a greater number than among the men; and, with their little problems, idiosyncracies and sacrifices, they are more clearly etched. Apparently the author takes more interest in her women characters, for about them center the plots of most of her stories.

New England Nun — A New England Nun describes, in Louisa Ellis, a type probably very common in the New England villages of the last part of the nineteenth century. Louisa,

sewing her linen seams, distilling roses, dusting and polishing, and folding things away in lavender, lived a calm, serene life of pleasant peace. She loved her neat, maidenly possessions and "had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of genuine triumph at the sight of the window panes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau drawers with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity."[1] So serene and placidly narrow had become her life that, when her old lover returned to marry her, she shrank from the thought of coarse, masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter and of a coarse, masculine presence in the midst of all her delicate harmony. No wonder she was thankful when Joe Dagget wanted to marry someone else and she herself was free to live her days like an uncloistered nun. Of Esther, in A Conflict Ended, Miss Wilkins writes: "She was more fixed in the peace and pride of her old maidenhood than she had realized, and was more shy of disturbing it. Her comfortable meals, her tidy housekeeping, and her prosperous work had become such sources of satisfactition to her that she was almost wedded to them, and jealous

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1 A New England Nun in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, pages, 9,10

of any interference."[1]

Gentle Elderly Sisters — Somewhat like Louisa and Esther are the elderly sisters depicted in A Far Away Melody, A Mistaken Charity, and A Gala Dress. Patient, gentle souls they were, having a difficult time to make both ends meet, yet loving their plain, weather-beaten little homes. The Shattucks, sent to the Old Ladies' Home by blundering but well-intentioned benefactors, ran away from the comfort and ease of their new life, seeking once more their poor little cottage with its leaky roof and walls full of chinks.

The Babcock sisters, too, were poor and jealously guarded the privacy of their scanty meals. They were sensitive, reticent women, keeping out of the sight of their neighbors as much as possible. The blinds of their cottage were usually closed and they never sat on the cool brick piazza in full view of any watchers; even when they worked in the garden, the front door was left slightly ajar so that, at the approach of a passer-by, they could softly disappear. They had but one black silk dress between them; and "to their notions of etiquette, black silk was as sacred a necessity as feathers at the English court."[2] Therefore, with a certain pathetic pride they took turns going out into

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1 A Conflict Ended in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 394

2 A Gala Dress in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 44

society clad in the one gala dress, keeping the secret from their neighbors by changing the velvet on it for lace.

A like reticence appears in Priscilla and Mary Brown. They were both of a deeply religious cast of mind. "They had studied the Bible faithfully, if not understandingly, and their religion had strongly tinctured their daily life. They knew almost as much about the Old Testament prophets, as they did about their neighbors."[1] They had thought about the bare facts of sin and repentance, future punishment and reward but they talked very little about their religious convictions even to each other, seldom speaking God's name though he was in their thoughts every moment.

Domineering Women

Quite a contrast to these gentle, dignified sisters was the domineering woman. She might be a mother or wife or niece; but whatever her relationship was to some other important character in the story, she dominated the situation. Such a person was Mrs. Abel Lee who turned her husband into a "kitchen colonel", making him clean dandelion greens, do the churning, and wash dishes. She took boarders to support the family and needed help with the housework. Although a small, frail-looking old woman,

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1 A Far-Away Melody in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 211

"she seemed always to have through her a strong quiver as of electric wires."[1] Once she might have been pretty but "she had withered complete, as some flowers do on their stalks, keeping all their original shapes and fading into themselves, not scattering any of their graces abroad."[2]

David Ayres had been brought up with a dread of his fair-faced, firm-handed mother; and when she strenuously set herself to put an end to his courting of Almira King, he could not stand against her opposition. To be sure, she had a ghastly vantage ground which she made the most of. She had organic heart trouble and the doctors had said a good deal about the danger of over excitement. Therefore, when "the hard jaws seemed to show through Mrs. Ayres' soft cheeks" and "a blue tinge appeared around her mouth and nostrils",[3] David gave in.

Under the dominance of the niece who had come to live with her, Aunt Lucinda's whole mode of life had been changed. She no longer had a voice in anything and had become deprecatory and shame-faced about herself, no longer daring to express any preferences. Her rather untidy house was thoroughly cleaned twice a year; she was not allowed to

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1 A Kitchen Colonel in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 432

2 Ibid, page 433

3 An Innocent Gamester in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins,

have tea, rich cup cakes, or pork and potatoes for supper; she was told to burn her playing cards. Charlotte was well-intentioned and wanted to do her best for her aunt; but she "was so determined, when she set about being good and doing her whole duty, that she was quite capable of tyrannizing over goodness itself."[1] Like the other domineering women in Miss Wilkins' stories, Charlotte was over forceful and decisive; she had a strong will which could be imposed on others; and she was rather narrow in her point of view.

Unconventional Independent Thinkers

Another character type among the women was the unconventional, independent thinker. She was the kind who, in spite of accepted traditions and customs, decided for some reason upon a rather unusual course of action, and then, absolutely confident that she was right, pursued that course. With stubborn tenacity she clung to her idea, refusing to be stirred either by the disapproval of her neighbors or even by social ostracism.

Hetty Fifield, turned out of her old home by the town and feeling positive that some place other than the poorhouse should be provided for her, moved her few

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1 An Innocent Gamester in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 368

belongings into the meeting-house and set up housekeeping behind a sunflower quilt. Esther Gay stayed away from service on Sunday mornings. Being deaf and unable to hear the sermon, she decided that she could serve the Lord better by earning extra money for charity. In order to support their families, Almira King's mother and Louisa Britton had to do a man's work on their farms. Louisa's mother was shocked at the idea and folks talked about Mrs. King; but the two women, unmoved, pursued their tasks with practical hardihood and a certain masculine strength of character.

Jilted Sweethearts

The course of young love did not always run smooth in the tales of Mary E. Wilkins; in fact, it often met with temporary tragedy -- although a happy ending followed in many cases -- and the jilted sweethearts are none too few. A pitiful wreck from a shattered romance was old Fidelia Almy,Fidelia, the patient waiter, whose head forever nodded like a flower in the wind because of a nervous disease, Fidelia who, through the long years, trudged twice a day to the post office for a letter that never came. Although there were some girls who, like Delia Caldwell, met the heartache of a broken love affair with a certain defiant courage and rugged strength, there were others like Lois Arms, Love, or Almira King who could

not stand up under the blow. Sensitive and reserved, they did not complain but suffered in silence, still loving the youth who had turned from them. They lost interest in things and ate little, picking listlessly at their food; at night they lay awake staring into the darkness or crying softly; their simple, smiling faces became thin and pitiful. Folks began to say they were going into a decline and anxious mothers feared that they might drift into nervous invalidism. Fortunately, however, most of the erring lovers returned.

Loyal Sweethearts

Then, too, there were the loyal sweethearts, girls who, having once loved some village boy, could not forget, though he had gone far away. It never seemed to occur to them to take another beau; through the years they remained faithful, always remembering, perhaps waiting for the lover's return. Once in the past Gilman Lane had taught Clarissa May to make her first pot-pourri; and ever afterwards during his long absence the girl conserved rose leaves in bowls and jars, until her little house exhaled a spicy sweetness, the fragrance of an old memory. Tucked away in her bottom bureau drawer were the letters Gilman had written to her years before. Sometimes these sweethearts proved themselves

capable of great sacrifice. George Arnold stole some money from his father; but for years Hannah Redman, who loved him, let people think she did it, never saying a word to clear herself in spite of cruel social ostracism. In the story A Discovered Pearl, Lucy Glynn, a village dressmaker and not any too prosperous, paid the interest and taxes on Gilman Marlow's home lest he should lose it. Gilman had been away wandering from place to place; but he and Lucy had gone together years before; she didn't forget and went on loving him.

Natures Starved for Love

Of Christmas Jenny one of the village women indignantly said: "But I know one thing -- if she did get kind of twisted out of the reg'lar road of lovin', she's in another one, that's full of little dumbies an' starvin' chippies an' lame rabbits, an' she ain't lovecracked no more'n other folks."[1] Jenny, years before, had been keeping company with the Anderson boy but he had gone off and married another girl; and so Jenny's starved heart found comfort in caring for a little deaf and dumb boy and a strange assortment of animals.

"Twisted out of the reg'lar road of loving"! There was more than one lonely spinster who had met with a

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1 Christmas Jenny in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 173

like fate. Plain, unlovely creatures they usually were, but in them the need for loving was strong. They were capable of passionate devotion and should have been the mothers of little children upon whom they could pour the wealth of their affection; but life had cheated them and the unsatisfied strength of their love had warped and twisted their natures. Aurelia Flower, the child of a gloomy, undemonstrative father and a hard, silent mother, had never had anything of which she could be fond until the little orphan Myrtie came into her life. Poor Ann Millet, affection-starved all her life, tried not to begrudge other women their homes and folks, but she did have to have something to love, although that something was only her cat Willy. When he disappeared, her grief and a sense of the Lord's injustice goaded the meek, reverential nature into fierce revolt and she became a wicked, rebellious old woman, refusing to go to meeting.

Artistic Souls

In place of love, some of these simple village women found the romance of their lives in a poor little talent of some kind, a talent which filled their hearts with pathetic pride and added a rosy joy to their narrow, drab existences. Betsey Dole wrote poetry for the village folk when occasion arose; and when Mrs. Caxton had

the obituary verses about her son printed in sumptuous fashion on black-bordered paper, it was to Betsey "as if her poem had been approved and accepted by one of the great magazines. She had the pride and self-wonderment of recognized genius."[1] When the minister pronounced her poetry as poor as it could be, she suffered the torture of all artistic souls who realize that they have failed. She took everything that she had ever written and threw it into the fire. "Her face twisted as if the fire were curling over it also. Other women might have burned their lovers' letters in agony of heart. Betsey had never had any lover, but she was burning all the love letters that had passed between her and life."[2]

In Candace Whitcomb there burned smouldering fires of ambition and resolution; and when she was put out of the village choir after forty years of faithful service, her injured pride drove her to a fierce, eccentric revenge, that of sitting at her own parlor organ and drowning out by her loud singing the voice of the soloist who had taken her place. "To this obscure woman, kept relentlessly by circumstance in a narrow track, singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy was to Napoleon -- and now on her

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1 A Poetess in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 150

2 Ibid, page 155

island of exile she was still showing fight."[1]

Nancy Weeks had made of her folks' hair an intricate wreath of roses, pansies, lilies and other flowers. It hung in the best parlor to be observed and admired by all guests. "This innocent, narrow-minded, middle-aged woman felt as much throbbing wonder and delight over her hair wreath as any genius over one of his creations. As far as happiness of that kind went, she was just as well off as a Michael Angelo or a Turner; and as far as anything else, she was just as good a woman for believing in hair wreaths. She had toiled hard over this one; seemingly nothing but true artistic instinct and delight in work could have urged her on. It was exceedingly slow, nervous work and she was a very delicate woman. Many a night she had lain awake with her tired brain weaving the hair roses and lilies which her fingers had laid down."[2]

Conscience-ridden Women

There is one other character type which appears in Miss Wilkins' stories, that of the conscience-ridden woman. Marg'ret Poole, who stole some candies and toys at the village store to make a happier Christmas for her little grandchildren, was one of them; and another was Mrs. Tollet, who deceived her ailing husband by secretly putting gentian

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1 A Village Singer in A New England Nun: Mary E. Wilkins, page 30

2 A Souvenir in A Humble Romance: Mary E. Wilkins, page 354

into his food. Both woman, tortured by their consciences, finally confessed. Margaret Poole, though she later put slyly on the counter enough money to pay for the articles she had taken, could not read her Bible until the truth was told; and Mrs. Tollet grew thin, her face had a solemn, anxious look, and she could no longer go to church. Poor old Polly Moss, who had told the other poorhouse inmates glowing tales about her sister Liddy, could not die in peace until she had gasped out the truth: "I - s'pose I - was dretful wicked, but - I never had any sister Liddy." Twice Martha Patch did her work all over on some quilts she was making for two neighbors. She had made a mistake with one small piece of calico with pink roses on it and, anxious to earn her money "square", had preferred hours of extra work to deceit or explanations. Thus it was with these women. They had fast-bound, narrow ideas of right and wrong and their stern, puritanic natures allowed not the slightest deviation from the course which they believed they should follow. It seems never to have occurred to them to make excuses for themselves, once they did wrong, nor could they forget and go their way untroubled. In those narrow lives the sin, no matter how small, assumed enormous proportions; and the gentle sinner endured misery and torture until an over-sensitive conscience was satisfied by some kind of atonement.

CONCLUSIONS

The Countryside After considering the foregoing facts, there are a number of conclusions we can draw concerning the stories of Mary E. Wilkins. First of all, in her pictures of the New England countryside she gives us, on the whole, mere glimpses -- now of meadows and roads buried under winter snows, now of fragrant, moonlit nights, now of goldenrod waving under a September sky, now of old-fahioned flowers blossoming in primly arranged gardens. Seldom is Miss Wilkins profuse in her descriptions; seldom is the scene beautified by a poetic touch or colored by the author's own emotions. Nor does she use the artistic device of putting her settings into emotional harmony with her characters on the one hand or in emotional contrast on the other. With simple, unadorned sentences she depicts scattered bits of the countryside against which her characters can move, and our imaginations must fill in the details.

Homes and Special Places By far the most careful and detailed picture of New England half a century ago is that of the village homes. Very likely Mary E. Wilkins in her youth had a chance to see just such old-fashioned kitchens, bedrooms and best parlors as she describes; and

CONCLUSIONS

The Conclusions After considering the foregoing data, there are a number of conclusions we can draw concerning the writing of Mary E. Wilkins. First of all, the popularity of the New England countryside and climate, or the whole, more likely — one of seldom are people buried under white snows, one of frozen, moonlit nights, one of poinsettas waving under a Caribbean sky, one of sun-tanned figures lounging in great, arrayed gardens. Seldom is this Wilkins setting in her descriptions; seldom is the scene modified by a gentle breeze or calmed by the sunset's rosy emotions. Her days are the gray-white days of shivering for warmth into emotional barrenness with but occasions on lonely hills or in secluded corners on the river. Also rigid, unbending characters are despite possibilities of the contrition against which her characters struggle, and our impression never fail in the drama.

Image and Symbol By far the most careful and detailed history of Mary Wilkins's life is a review of the Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Here Miss Mary E. Wilkins in her books had a chance to see just such old-fashioned kitchens, bedrooms and back yards on the farmsteads and

having keen powers of observation and a retentive memory, she gives them back to us in her stories -- the marble-topped tables and beaded lamp mats, the gift editions of Mrs. Hemans' poems bound in red and gold, the stiff, hair-cloth sofas, the scrolled wall paper, and rag carpets. We see, too, the cool brick piazzas and the trim gardens with sweet william, rosemary and pansies arranged in gay hearts and circles and triangles. As for places of special interest in each rural community, we are allowed glimpses, sometimes vague, sometimes illuminating, of the white-steepled meeting house, the general store, and the factories. Best of them all is the description of the old cemetery. Strange as it seems, Miss Wilkins does not give us any detailed picture of the town hall or little red schoolhouse, both famous in the traditions of old New England.

Social Life and Customs

Moreover, although many social customs are dealt with in the stories of Mary E. Wilkins, some that we always associate with nineteenth century New England are not mentioned. Sugaring-off parties in the early spring, jolly sleigh rides in the winter, spelling bees and quilting parties, all of them popular in the old rural districts, have no part in Miss Wilkins' works. She does, however, offer us vivid descriptions of afternoon teas, courtings, and weddings; and we get from her tales a

great deal of information about the means of livelihood for unmarried women in those days. Tailoring, dressmaking, doing of odd jobs, farming, peddling vegetables, eggs and honey, gathering simples -- all types of work are represented, together with the struggles, the little economies, and the pathetic pride of the upright, honest souls who did their best to make a living.

Psychological and Human Background

Brought up in the repressed, puritanic atmosphere of an isolated country town, Mary E. Wilkins thoroughly understood the psychological and human background of the rural communities in the New England of her day. She was well acquainted with the various character types. Sometimes, to be sure, she leaned too much towards the abnormal and eccentric personalities, those who had been warped and twisted by the narrowness of their surroundings; but she often gives us men and women and young girls who are normal and thoroughly human. Miss Wilkins, following the realistic method, does not talk about her characters or explain them; she lets them, through conversation or action, reveal themselves, those inner selves which even they do not always understand. Her interest is not in splendid deeds or magnificent nobility of soul, nor even in tremendous tragedy; it is rather in the pathetic and commonplace, the trivial things which loomed so large in those narrow lives. The

characters are intensely real and awaken in our hearts a chord responsive to their yearnings and joys and sorrows.

Emphasis on Women One of the most interesting and noticeable things in the stories is the fact that Miss Wilkins greatly neglects the men of the period and almost always puts the women characters in the foreground. Of course, many times a man is necessary to the plot, particularly in the love stories; but he is seldom given as prominent a place or as much attention as is accorded his young sweetheart, domineering mother or eccentric aunt. As regards dress, means of livelihood, home life, or psychology, we learn a great deal more about the women than the men.

Evaluation On the whole, the short stories of Mary E. Wilkins will never be ranked among the great works of literature, probably just because of their typically New England background. They lack the human representativeness characteristic of all truly high art; they fail to express the deepest ageless truths of human life, the universal, lasting thoughts and feelings, hopes and desires of humanity. There is in them too much of the contemporary element. However, her stories have a strong appeal and interest, for they picture with illuminating touches of local color and with sympathy and understanding a certain period, a certain locality, and certain types of people. The period has

slipped away into the Past, the locality is rapidly changing, the types have almost all vanished; but once more in the short stories of Mary E. Wilkins they return to us and live again -- the villages and countryside, the customs and social life, the unique personalities belonging to the last part of the nineteenth century in rural New England.

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